屍鬼
SHIKI
一
小野不由美
新潮文庫

Table Of Contents

1. sinnesspiel
2. sinnesspiel
3. sinnesspiel
4. sinnesspiel
5. sinnesspiel
6. sinnesspiel
7. sinnesspiel
8. sinnesspiel
9. sinnesspiel
10. sinnesspiel
11. sinnesspiel
12. sinnesspiel
13. sinnesspiel
14. sinnesspiel
15. sinnesspiel
16. sinnesspiel
17. sinnesspiel
18. sinnesspiel
19. sinnesspiel
20. sinnesspiel
21. sinnesspiel
22. sinnesspiel
23. sinnesspiel
24. sinnesspiel
25. sinnesspiel
26. sinnesspiel
27. sinnesspiel
28. sinnesspiel
29. sinnesspiel

sinnesspiel

The prologue and chapter one are translated and linked here for convenience. Thanks to an anonymous commentator's suggestion, I'm providing translation notes for those less accustomed to Japanese media. They range from explaining honorifics most anime/manga fans are familiar with to the various festivals and traditions. I'm trying to think of a good way to organize them. By chapter? Alphabetical order? Sub headings?

Chapters are broken up into sub-parts as listed in the book:

Links to chapters:

Muroi Seishin's Essay
Prologue
Chapter 1 - 1
Chapter 1 - 2
Chapter 1 - 3
Chapter 1 - 4
Chapter 1 - 5

Notes:
General
Names

- In Japanese, names are typically given last name first. The character written as Muroi Seishin's first name is Seishin. They will typically write Western names in Western order, however (nobody calls John Smith by Smith John in Japanese, not even in formally written history books). In Japanese, people are more commonly than in English referred to by their last name, usually with an honorific. Referring to someone by their first name tends to imply either an adult talking to a child or familiarity/closeness (childhood friends Maeda Motoko and Yano Kanami; Ozaki Toshio and Muroi Seishin; current friends Mutou Tohru and Yuuki/Koide Natsuno, etc. do this, though in Natsuno's case there are special

circumstances regarding his last name). Likewise, using no honorific either on a last name or a first name is either very brusque and rude or rather intimate.

Honorofics

- Most honorifics can be applied to first or last names, with the last name being the more formal choice. Not all are necessarily strictly to denote respect, as you will see, but declare relationships to people.

-san - Respectful. Closest equivalent is the English Mr./Mrs./Ms., and it applies across all genders. It's used much more frequently than in English; fellow students who can and do refer to each other by lastname-san, whereas in English, referring to your classmate or in most situations even your coworkers as Mr./Mrs./Ms. last name would seem overly formal. It can also be used with first names. This is a major reason I've kept it as -san rather than translating it as Mr./Mrs./Ms., as well as because the other honorifics don't have English equivalents even as close as that, necessitating the use of honorifics in general unless one just wants to lose that information in translation for no particular reason beyond laziness.
-kun - Most commonly used towards boys the same age or younger. Used on males the same age by either other boys or girls, it indicates less distance than -san without crossing into the brusque feel invoked by using one's name raw, without any honorific. Many teachers (and other adults) refer to older (middle or high school) female students as lastname-san and male students by lastname-kun, but it's not remotely unusual for girls to get the -kun treatment, especially in higher education (college, graduate school, etc.). In primary school or perhaps the first year or two of middle school, girls may be addressed as -chan depending on the teacher. Girls being referred to as -kun by their peers is fairly unusual. Girls are most likely to be -kun in specific situations, such as scientists in laboratories or other particularly professional but not necessarily formal environments. It's almost always lastname-kun in this context, though in general, particularly with boys, it can be used with a first or last name.
-chan - Diminutive, usually used on young girls and young boys,

with the acceptable range for referring to boys with -chan being much younger. It tends to imply cuteness, so think of it as appropriate for the age range at which being called cute is still a compliment; most 10 year old boys don't really want to be thought of as cute, but a 19 year old girl would still probably be happy. What age range 'young girl' refers to varies as much between people as what age they'd say one should refer to people with -chan. The older the one referred to it gets, the closer one's peers should be to use it with them. Adults will refer to younger girls with it as they please if they've known the target since they were very young. Given everyone in Sotoba knows everyone in passing, most adults will be calling most young girls with -chan. Usually used with first names, given its nature usually comes with first name level intimacy, but it's not particularly strange for it to be appended to the last name. A boy who lets himself be referred to by this is either very childish or very easy going. Almost exclusively in fiction, some boys will go by it to put off an air of being extremely approachable (Tohru in Shiki, Momo-chan-sempai in Prince of Tennis).
Nurse Ritsuko has her name shortened to Ricchan which lacks the hyphen due to a slight pronunciation difference. Ri-chan becomes Ricchan, which sounds almost the same beyond a slight hiccup of a pause between the i and the ch sound, based on the fact that it flows from the mouth more easily. It's written to denote that pronunciation difference, as Japanese is a phonetically written language, so I carried it on over thusly.
Those of you not familiar with the anime/manga to give you a mental image of each character will still probably be able to tell which nurses are younger based on who's -chan'ed.
-sama - Very respectful or reverent (or very sarcastic). Used by servants towards masters, appended to god's names, though also used by rabid fans about, say, their favored idol or celebrity.
-sensei - Denotes a professional, generally in a highly learned field. I'll usually translate this since translating it when used on Ozaki as 'Doctor' or a teacher as 'Professor' is entirely appropriate and natural in English with no information lost. It refers to anyone who's a professional in certain respected fields, particularly doctors, authors, etc. This includes manga artists, as in Japanese comics most writers are also the artists as opposed to Western comics where writers are not necessarily illustrators and vice versa. Ozaki is commonly referred to as Waka-sensei or Young Doctor (translated

as Junior Doctor along with Seishin's waka-gouin becoming Junior Monk, because I think it sounds better and denotes that most of the village still thinks of them as son-of-predecessor more than having necessarily come into their own, a connotation ironically lost if left untranslated). Some just call him Sensei, which is translated as Doctor. Ozaki-sensei is translated as Dr. Ozaki. If anyone ever refers to Muroi as Muroi-sensei or sensei in regards to him being an author, I will keep it -sensei since English has no particular form of address used for authors.

-shi - Authors or other professionals are also referred to with **-shi**, but usually only when talking about them in a distant, remote sense. Very academic and stuffy, usually used for professional writing/analysis of a writer's works, citations, etc.

- **Onee-san (Big Sister), Onii-san (Big Brother)** - While in English it's uncommon to refer to one's parents or grandparents by name, in Japanese it is also unusual to refer to one's older siblings by name. Just as in calling one's parents Mom and Dad, in Japanese it's more common to address older siblings with their title as well. These can become Onee-chan and Onii-chan instead, too, carrying the connotations of greater familiarity and warmth with -chan, but more respect and propriety with -san. Mothers and father's forms of address have these too, but they can be more or less translated with variations on Mother, Father, Mom, Dad, etc. There's also the more uncommonly used **Aniki** (big brother) and even more uncommon still **Aneki** (big sister), which are either old fashioned and precise without being formal or a bit abrupt; they're common yakuza terms and thus tend to imply a tougher (but respectful towards the 'sibling') class of speaker. **Aniue** and **Aneue** (Brother, sister) are highly respectful, proper terms of regard. To refer to one's older sibling by name is rather cheeky.

However, the terms for little brother or sister, **otouto** and **imouto**, are not used as address so much as to designate relationships; "My little brother", or "my little sister." One could call their little siblings by those terms, but it will sound condescending and arrogant, or on occasion poetic/literary. "Oh, little brother, find happiness!"

- **Baa-chan/ Jii-san -** Commonly affixed to an old person's name, or used as a replacement for their name. These are the terms for grandparents, but are also used on non-related old people. The Baa terms refer to older women, the Jii groups to older men. While the -chan suffix is diminutive of names, it's more informal and/or

friendly on the referential old person suffix. Baa and Jii are never used without a suffix -san, -chan, or -sama, though it can be doubled and used plainly to be particularly rude; Baba, jiji for old hag and old fart. The O prefix is respectful, but can still be used with -chan for a mix and match of both polite and friendly. Originally I was translating it as the grandmother/grandfather/ granny/grandpa/old woman/old man/old lady, but I'd like some feedback on readers if I should continue trying to do it that way or just give in and keep it Japanese.

School

- In Japan, primary school is 1st - 5th, middle school is 6th - 9th grade and high school is 10th-12th. I'll probably just translate them as their class year rather than "first year middle school" and whatnot, but sometimes there's only a vague mention that they're generally in middle school or high school, so these are the ranges for that. Classes are Monday through Friday with a half day on Saturdays. Also, summer vacation is usually from mid-July to the end of August; the school year doesn't start and end around this break, in Japan. Graduation and a new school year starts in March/ April.

Family Register

The family register fills the roles of birth certificates, death certificates, marriage licenses, and the census in Japan. Statuses outside of death and birth, such as marriage and paternity, are not official until recorded in the family register. In the past, registrations were managed at Buddhist temples and to register with the state, it was required to register with and thus fund the temple. There were separate registers for different classes and certain outcast classes were not allowed to register. After the Meiji Restoration, all citizens were required to have last names (previously reserved for elite classes), the register was for all citizens, and registration was no longer tied to temples.

Japanese Faith/Spirituality Notes

Ono Fuyumi's degree is in Buddhist studies, which may or may not play a part in its heavy presence within the story. You won't be earning any degrees in Japanese religion by reading Shiki, much less with my meager cultural notes, but if I can explain it enough to foster less confusion and greater enjoyment, I've done my job. If something is unclear, I haven't, so let me know and I'll endeavor to better detail it.

Buddhism, Shintoism, Temples, Shrines

- An extreme simplification of Buddhism and Shintoism in Japan.

Japan has a long history of blending their native religion, Shintoism, with Buddhism. Shintoism is primarily focused on gods or kami who are supernatural spirits residing in nature, in events such as lightening or rain storms and even in man-made goods such as cups or tools; different spiritual beings warp based on various circumstances and legends into forms of monsters or supernatural creatures such as wily foxes or tengu. Despite a national ban on blending the faiths that lasted for a period, the two faiths are deeply entwined in daily Japanese life and in common practice and belief. The Buddhist establishment is called a temple in translation, the Shinto establishments Shrines. There is no conflict in attendants of the Buddhist Temple also taking part in Shinto Shrine maintenance and activities; rather, doing one and not the other would be seen as slacking in faith-based activities. The Jizo, which have a Buddhist basis, are often in Shinto-based hokora. This is an extreme simplification, but there is much blending and feedback history between faiths to make for many variants of traditions and ceremonies.

For details on Shinto shrines specifically, see

this entry

in Chapter 2 regarding parts of a shrine.

Sotoba 卒塔婆

- Wooden grave markers of various heights ranging from the size of a child to taller than a grown man. Include a Buddist sutra and a posthumous name determined based on the life of the person, usually determined by a Buddhist priest.

Sample

from Wikimedia Commons.

Sotoba 外場

- The village. The first kanji means outside, the second means place or field. Generally read gaiba to mean a field outside an area, the first kanji can also be read soto, so the town was named with that pun.

Essay
The other shore (Higan)

- Seishin's essay, the pre-prologue writing, mentions Higan, translated as 'the other shore.' In Japanese Buddhist lore there's the Sanzu river, the equivalent of the River Styx more well known in the West, that one crosses to reach the afterlife and must pay a six coin toll to pass. Higan is the shore of enlightenment.

Chapter 1 - 1
Shiki

- A made up term. Shi for corpse, ki as in oni or ogre or demon.

Curse

- The Japanese concept of a curse is at times a bit different than the common English use. In English, and at times in Japanese, it's a magic spell to make bad things happen. In Japanese, it is also frequently used to refer to the result of a strong emotions having a

supernatural effect on the real world, for example, a dead person's obsession with someone causing the dead to come back or manifest as a spirit, perhaps not acting as their full and sane self, would be called a curse. In Shiki, a prayer with a gruesome ritual (burning the Bettou) is used to point out how similar a noroi (呪い) curse is to a majinai (also 呪い) which is a charm or not-necessarily-evil magic spell, though a curse is technically always bad and a charm not necessarily so, that's quite subjective.

Japanese writing paper

- Novel mentions that Seishin still writes with this. It has squares that you fill in vertically.

Sample

from Wikimedia Commons.

Chapter 1 - 2

Hokora

- Small shrines, varying from the sizes of smaller than a dog house to the size of a modest shed. While major gods or spirits are generally housed in the large shrines, hokora tend to be for minor, local or folk gods. They can be located at road sides or on the grounds of shrines established for more major gods. There are many variations based on the god or gods housed; common features include stone figures such as Jizo or large stones with various meanings. There are also occasionally boxes for monetary offerings, or offerings of goods, food, drink, etc. can be placed about the hokora.

Example

from Wikimedia Commons.

Jizo

- A stone representation of the Bodhisattva seeking to guide people in the physical and spiritual world, often placed at road sides to encourage choosing the right path. Commonly known as the guardian of children and pregnant women. Stones are commonly piled by the statues in the idea of lessening the burden on children who must stack stones in the underworld for good karma either for themselves or their parents. Stacking stones is said to represent building a stupa, a Buddhist symbol to help develop good karma; Sotoba gravemarkers are based on the concept of stupa, as well. Sometimes a serene faced statue, other times a simple stone representation, often with a bib, Jizo have taken on many forms and purposes, not all of them necessarily representing the Bodhisattva but also representing gods at times. An

example of a Jizo in a Hokora

from Wikimedia Commons.

Oni

- Supernatural beings of Japanese folklore, usually humanoid but with monstrous teeth and ogre like faces, usually colored red or blue. Usually bringing calamity and mischief, they can also be thought of as good luck in some contexts, and they're often placed in front of construction sites or buildings much like lucky gargoyles in the west. Men dressing up as them for ceremonies and parades to ward of bad luck is common.

Keyari

- A ritualistic thrusting spear with feathers.

Example image

from nihontou.

Mushiokuri

- Explained in detail in the text. Saitou Betto Sanemori became a vengeful spirit of insects eating rice plants due to his fall in battle being based on one of such plants in the fields. The story of Saitou Sanemori is also given quite a bit of detail in text, and there are many Noh plays about him. Relevant to this story is the Noh play of the monk Tawami (the 14th Yugyou or successor to Ippen, the founder of a the Ji sect of Japanese Buddhism). Tawami and two attending priests are performing ceremonies/chanting sutras at Shinohara, where two hundred years ago Sanemori died when his horse tripped over a rice root, leaving him open to enemy attack. He had lingered there at Shinohara as the image of an old man only Tawami could see. The priests perform a ceremony to help him release his shame and regrets to pass on.

Bettou

- It'll be a lot easier if you just think of this as 'lord', an honorific title with specific historical connotations, and go about your business. For those with a little more time:

Originally a term used in the feudal Japanese system of government to denote a government official who temporarily took on all of the duties of governing for another territory. Eventually came to simply mean the highest order of director or overseer in various government divisions from the Department of State which handled all secular affairs of government to the Department of Divinities. Due to the latter, in religious contexts it frequently refers to a monk/priest with administrative status. Other court members not related to governing would get the same titles for their courtly ranks in each specific division, including musicians, etc. so there could be many, many bettous in various fields and territories. Saito Sanemori was also known as 'Nagai Bettou' due to his stronghold being in the city of Nagai in the Musashi providence.

Yugyou shounin

- Literally Wandering Saint. It can refer to any wandering monk, but is strongly associated with the Toutakusan Muryoko-in Shoujoukou-ji sect of Buddhism, most often called the Ji sect, or

Yugyou-ji for the 'wandering temple'. Yugyou Shounin is often another name for Ippen, the founder of said sect, such that he would be

the

wandering monk rather than a wandering monk, but his successive heads would also be called this at times. The wandering monk Taiku who attended to Sanemori in the Noh play of Sanemori was also called a yugyou shounin.

Yuge-shuu -

Based off of the term yugyou shonen, the first kanji 遊 is also the symbol for play, also the first symbol in the word game, a word with special meaning in Buddhism. Game is said yuugi in standard talk, but the Buddhist meaning is pronounced yuge. Bodhisattvas, those who wish to save others before becoming attaining enlightenment themselves, freely choosing to save others and enjoying themselves in doing it. Despite having reached enlightenment, they "play" in the mortal realm to help others as it brings them happiness. In this way, to do something as play and to do something freely have similar meanings. In some sects of Buddhism, disciples and monks are encouraged to wander freely teaching and saving others, with a mindset like play. Thus, the reading for the mushiokuri act is Yuge-shuu, a play wanderer. The word yuge also means steam or vapor, making it a pun of sorts for the names of those 'smoking out' the village of insects.

Chapter 1 - 3
Obon, Bon

- A blend of Japanese Buddhism and folk traditions, it is a holiday for honoring the dead, set at different dates depending where you are in the country, from the middle of July to the middle of August. It can be called Bon or have the 'O' formal honorific added to it to become Obon. Some consider the Bon season to last a full month

with earlier preparations, grave cleaning, etc. being included. In Sotoba, it is stated to be from August 13th to the 16th.

Many travel to their home towns to celebrate Bon, just as in New Years. That can be rather inconvenient though, so it's not unheard of just not to bother.

The exact nature of the celebrations vary from region to region, just as the dates, though universal factors include opening on the first evening, (

Mukae

or welcome) with fires made of burning hemp welcoming ancestor spirits home or going to the graves with bon lamps and leading them to the family altar which has been prepared in advance, bon dancing (

Odori

or dance), and a send-off (

Okuri

or send off).

A common tradition with great variability is the construction of cucumber horses and eggplant cows. In some regions, they are both put out, facing the house, for the spirits to ride in on. In others, the horse is put out during

Mukae-bon

for a fast return and the cow during

Okuri-bon

for a slow return. The opposite also occurs, to express fear/ respect of a lingering unsatisfied spirit.

Example

image from Musashi Restaurant.

Families tend to ancestor's graves and presenting offerings before and during the main festival celebrations. As it is a religious festival, praying is a large part of it and some go house to house praying, or have monks come by to pray at the altars. It ends by floating lanterns down the river as if seeing off the visiting dead spirits. Sometimes, offerings are sent into the river with them. Whether these include the horses and cows differs by region; sometimes they're just left at the riverside.

Shinkousai

- A Shinto festival for when the gods come visiting, literally meaning "The festival of the pleasing of the gods." Parishoners carry three portable shrines said to house the gods for the duration of the festival around town to celebrate and please them, to ward off disaster. Takes place on July 17th.

Chapter 1 - 4
Radio Exercises

- In Japan there were, and still are though they're not as popular now, radio broadcasts that people, especially old people and kids, exercise to, often in a public place where they get a stamped card each time they go. Especially popular in the summer when there's no school in session.

Japanese License Plates

- Just like American plates have the state the vehicle was registered listed on the plate, Japanese plates have the prefecture or municipality where the license was issued listed on them. They also have serial numbers, three on top, four on bottom; the old people in Sotoba memorize them to identify cars from the village, same as one could presumably do with any other nation's set of plates.

from Wikimedia Commons.

Tengu

- From Shinto folklore, classified as either gods or demons, they are monstrous supernatural creatures associated with wars and less dangerously, mischief. Tied into Buddhism as well, they're seen to primary target the cocky, as egotism does not mesh well with Buddhist principles. They are commonly seen in two types, a crow type that looks like a human-crow hybrid and the mountain type mentioned by Ozaki. Mountain tengu are said to be priests, specifically mountain aesthetics, who were corrupted by pride; they may still be basically good and repenting, or out to cause havoc.

Chapter 1 - 5

Kiyohara Natsuno

- Natsuno remarks that he was named after a Heian era (794 to 1185) noble; this refers to Kiyhoara Natsuno (Kiyohara no Natsuno), a prince and politician from the Kiyohara clan. He was well trusted by the people and was heavily involved in writing the Ryo no Gige, a commentary on administrative code and government.

Takasago Pine

- There's a famous Noh play and legend about a monk who saw an old couple beneath a pine. The old man was raking up and saving the pine needles, representing good fortune, and the old woman was sweeping away the trash and unwanted debris, representing the bad things in life. The old couple tells the head monk that the trees at Takasago and Sumiyoshi are twin pines despite the distance between them, and that it symbolizes the far reaching imperial reigns as well as the flourishing art of poetry that

will live on because all things from people to trees are at the heart of poetry. The pine is green throughout all seasons and is said to be especially auspicious. It is soon revealed the old couple are the gods of the respective shrines where each of their pines reside, he at Sumiyoshi, she at Takasago. The man was Jou, the son of Izanagi, who fell in love with her, Uba, the maiden of the Takasago shrine. They died within minutes of each other and their spirits went into the two twin pines, where they continue to bless the shrines, poetry, and married couples, showing how love should flourish together into old age. The pair and the legend are fairly famous and seen in many works of art and traditional songs, particularly ones sang at weddings.

Example Crest Image

from Nanjai.

Example image of an actual pine at Takasago

from Wikimedia Commons.

Gateball

A game similar to croquette, where players hit balls with a mallet through goals on a field towards a center pole. Commonly associated with the elderly, also like croquette.

sinnesspiel

The prologue and part 1 of chapter 1 have already been done over

here at creiz

's livejournal. You may prefer their translations. They're less literal and have smoother flow. As best I can tell they're not doing any more.

I should note that at this stage none of these have seen an editor. This is me with the book in my lap at work between cases, calls, whatever. I might just plum fuck up. Chapters will be tweaked and changed as I scan through and see errors or remember things I think of to fix. Sorry about that.
Bible quotes are taken from the English King James version rather than translated due to propriety, but as I can see the argument for a re-translation even of a translated, famous, quoted work, here's a translation from Japanese (from which language *their* bible is translated I don't know) for good measure:
---End Translator's Intro---
To 'Salem's Lot'

Jehova spoke down, "What hast thou done?
Words of thy brother's lot calls to me from this earth,
thus art thou cursed and banished from this land.
This earth's open mouth has received thy little brother's blood,
by none other than your hand.
Thou shalt till thy lot on this earth without ever again reaping for thine efforts,
and a fugitive and a vagrant shall you become."

——Book of Genesis, Chapter 4 (Translated from the Japanese Edition)

And He said, What hast thou done? The voice of thy brother's blood crieth unto me from the ground.
And now art thou cursed from the earth, which hath opened her mouth to receive thy brother's blood from thy hand;
When thou tillest the ground, it shall not henceforth yield unto thee her strength; a fugitive and a vagabond shalt thou be in the earth.

——Book of Genesis, Chapter 4 (King James Version)

Prologue

The village is surrounded by death. What closes the village built upon the mountain stream into a triangle like a spear's tip is the forest of firs.

The fir resembles a Japanese cedar, handsome, yet short and stout. If a cedar is a sharp knife's edge, the fir is firelight. They have the contours of flame, burning thick at the wick's edge.
The hearty branches grow off of the straight and true trunk, the canopy forming a cone, the leaves are simple needles, and the only complexity to be found is that they don't grow in orderly rows but spiral. ---In summary, an unremarkable tree.

And yet it is a forest made exclusively of these firs that surrounds the village in death. They are the boundary of the village and they along with the mountain range that close off each side of the village are not of this world; they are Higan, the other shore.

While they look down upon the village from the other shore with their forty meter stature, their lifespan is only a one hundred and fifty to two hundred years. These are firs of destruction. If other greenery should try to spread, it is slaughtered to make way for

more still of themselves who that dominate the forest.

Those trees of destruction are raised for the dead, confined to the mountainsides alongside the village. Villagers toil making use of the fir forest's lumber for sotoba, and later they became used to make coffins. Ever since the village was born, its purpose was to craft for the dead.

And in that forest of firs are, most befitting of the land of the dead, grave markers.
The village still buries its dead. The villagers each have their own plot and it is there that their remains will be buried. There are no tombstones. The sotoba stand marking where the dead dwell. Upon the thirty third anniversary of the dead's memorial service, the sotoba are taken down and a fir tree is planted. Plant and forget. The dead have already returned to the mountain, there is nothing human left.

A forest made purely of firs, the firs themselves destroyed for the dead, is unmistakably a land of death. Closed in on three sides by firs, the village is isolated within death.

Actually, from the moment the village was opened, neighborhoods within that village have been isolated. The first settlers were a band of lumberjacks who had come in to clear out an area for their forest, a village with neither blood nor territorial ties.

Perhaps that's the reason that everything is settled within the village, without aid from those who live outside the village. The outside's influence is limited, like the bypass through the south rim of the village, only able to pierce through and continue on. Even if this road connects the village to bigger towns and to cities even bigger than those towns, as nothing stops, the village remains isolated.

All the same, the mountain village has mysteriously not suffered depopulation in recent years. The population neither grows, nor does it decline. Certainly, there have been families moving bit by bit from the more remote part of the village, but that number is offset by the growth at the southern part of town. The mountain

village always has a heavy population of seniors but as the elderly set off into the mountainside forests, the young return from thin air.

Seeing it carry on however trivially, yet certain never to close completely, the village may be thought of as a hokora. No matter how abandoned it may seem, like the brand of faith that drives one to stop by the hokora when they happen to remember it, the pulse of the village will go on without end.

If that is the case then the stolidity of the inert mountain village may be intentional. A bridge between this shore and the other, it is surrounded on three sides by that other shore, by death that isolates this shore in solemnity, away from the common world.

There, people labor for death and pray for the dead.

---Really, that was what the village was for ever since it was born.

sinnesspiel

The first sight of light thought to be a fire in the north western mountainous region of the town of Mizobe was reported to their fire station, on November 8th a little past 3:00AM.

The temperature was 9.6°C, the humidity level - 62.3%, wind velocity - 12.8 meters per second, and there was a dry weather advisory so it wasn't unexpected that the fire alarm would sound.

With the receiver to his ear, Yoshino quickly tossed aside the magazine he was reading and hurried out front of his branch station.

The northern branch station was in the mountain ranges cloaked in darkness. During the day, the clear late autumn skies would likely be a backdrop to the green expanse of mountain ranges. Yoshino had seen it so often he could vividly call it to mind, the evergreen laden, rolling slopes that overlapped each other gently, and the shifting and mingling, vibrant colors of fall; those were the mountains Yoshino was accustomed to.

Now those mountains were a shadow cutting off the night sky's spread of countless scattered lights, lying beneath like a jet black shadow. As if they were stars fallen from the sky, small lights could be seen here and there, and whether they were always there was still unclear.

"Nori-san, do you see anything?"

Yoshino turned around at the voice of his nervous co-worker.

"No."

A wind cold enough to chill the bone blew through. It blew

through from the mountains towards the city. Struck by the dry breeze as it got under the collar of his uniform, Yoshino adjusted it absently, eyes still on the mountains.

The mountains of northern Mizobe made up about two thirds of the town. Most of the population lived in the remaining third of the town, concentrated in the urban area but a few small villages, considered a part of the town, dotted the mountains. The question was whether the 'light thought to be a fire' was in one of those settlements or not.

To be honest, it was fine so long as it was in a village. Each neighborhood was spread out amongst the mountains, isolated and with the old houses generally close together within narrow valleys. At least each village had their own fire squad and they would be aware of the risk of the dry weather warning. They would definitely have the water and the man power to handle it. They could fight a fire. What was truly terrifying was if it weren't that--if it were a fire coming from the mountains.

While cradling his body against the wind, Yoshino gazed steadily at the black mountain ridges. There were no particularly high mountains. They extended in an even flow of meager highs and lows. They were all mountains ideal for hiking, but the mountain ridges were complex and transportation within them was unexpectedly poor. The trees planted for harvest were mostly Japanese cedars and cypress but the underbrush was withered and it was dry enough to crunch on contact. Once a fire broke out in the mountains, the odds of it becoming a large scale fire were high. He remembered the large scale fires in Okayama and Hiroshima that summer.

(Please, just let it be a regular house fire.)

As if he had heard Yoshino's prayer aloud, his coworker spoke.

"Sure hope it's not a wild fire."

Yoshino nodded. Once a fire licked at the underbrush it would spread horrifically fast. As soon a wide slope was overtaken with fire, it would be fanned by the thirteen meter per second winds,

racing up and down countless mountain ridges and swallowing up the isolated villages throughout the northern mountains. And moreover, that wind was blowing down into Mizobe as if taking aim.

Yoshino had a nagging feeling as he looked up at the mountains, pulling his collar up further and shivering.

An express way was opened that ran through the southern mountain region. Due to the interchange, areas that were once nothing but rice fields were undergoing rapid development. The housing district built over the fields had taken up all of the level ground and continued to develop north, and now even the mountain slopes continued to be cleared. The mountains and the town merged together into one territory.

'Please,' he prayed without a word, without an addressee, when suddenly the alarm bell cried out. Yoshino turned towards the branch office in a panic. At that moment a young coworker came flying out of the office.

"I saw the light from above! It's from Sotoba!"

The fire engine ripped through the neighborhood north along the Omi river, into the mountain ranges spread out north of Mizobe. At least nothing unusual was reported from the mountains yet. The deep darkness of the mountains continued but that was all that could be seen of them.

Beneath the indigo night sky, black slopes flowed. In the quiet of the pre-dawn highway, the fire engine met with a sudden gust of wind as if the wind remembered to blow as soon as the engine was out of the city streets, but they met with not so much as a shadow of an oncoming car.

The seemingly tranquil night, the seemingly monotonous mountains, both of them were in their own way trying his patience. The road twisted and curved back along itself, along the river and the mountain ridges. There were no recklessly steep mountains but the will to dig tunnels or flatten the mountains had waned over time. As a result, even while going towards the northern villages,

you had to turn south at several intervals. Meanwhile, a spreading fire didn't care about something like that. Fires just pushed on straight ahead with the wind.

Thinking about that, every curve made his stomach ache. Continuing with dogged determination along the mountain as best they could, at last ahead he could see the light of the expressway. That brilliant illumination shone straight ahead, passing over the top of the valley.

On the northern side of the mountain that rose from that valley was Sotoba---the former Sotoba. What should have been Sotoba. In the valley of the river were about four hundred homes. The population was just over 1,300, the largest of the villages in the mountain ranges.

"We can't see anything yet."

Yoshino nodded at his young coworker's voice.

"If it were daybreak, we might at least be able to see smoke but..." Yoshino answered when it struck him. Before the call had come in, he was just reading a certain magazine. It had been left behind by one of the squad members, Maeda, who had died just last month. Maeda lived in Sotoba. He remembered him bringing in the magazine, bragging that one of the authors was from Sotoba. That was about half a year ago. He said it was an essay written about Sotoba, seeming delighted as he opened it to the carefully marked page to show it off. Yoshino had taken that magazine off of the back of the shelf by chance.

Had Maeda died of illness? He should have been about Yoshino's age if not younger. His family came for his things, taking all of his personal belongings aside from the magazine left behind in the depths of the shelves.

While remembering as much without knowing why he was remembering it, Yoshino focused on the radio. It seemed headquarters didn't know the particulars yet either. Not only didn't they know the conditions on the scene, they didn't even know specifically where the fire was, so of course there were no details.

Yoshino asked one of the brigade members in the passenger seat, "We still haven't heard from Sotoba's fire brigade?"

The crew members looked towards the radio.

"It seems no one is at the post."

"Impossible!"

There was a dry weather warning. A fire could break out at any time. Each fire brigade was advised to be on alert, so somebody should have definitely been at the station.

"Their brigade chief?"

"Our office has tried to call him at home, but as expected nobody seems to have answered."

"I figured as much but..."

Yoshino clicked his tongue lightly. Strictly speaking the fire department and the fire brigade were separate unites that worked alongside each other. The fire department gave instructions but they weren't a monolithic entity, so it wasn't as if they were as in tune with them as they would be their own limbs.

"You don't think the station and the chief's house are already up in flames, do you?"

Yoshino's brows knitted together as his young coworker said that, unsure if it was fear or a joke. If things had gone that far then they should have received word from Sotoba beforehand. Even so, he couldn't keep from imagining the worst in his mind. What if there was no chance to make contact in all of the chaos?

They drove around another curve. After crossing one more ridge, there was a field opening up towards the north. The bridge connecting to the national highway came into view. Beyond the expressway lit up as bright as broad daylight was the lacquer black mountain. Beyond that was chaos. In the darkness of their path were points of red light, scattered, glowing sparks.

Yoshino was not alone, the entire group in the engine cried out. They knew that the worst had happened. It wasn't a simple house fire. It was unmistakably a wild fire. Even with the well-lit expressway, they could tell by how many points of light there were that it was of no ordinary scale.

"This can't be...." Somebody mumbled. The team member in the passenger's seat reported the conditions fitfully. They needed backup. With its size, with this wind, it was far beyond the branch office's capabilities.

How long would it take to extinguish it (it would be more appropriate to express in days no doubt), and how much of the mountain village would be destroyed by the fire, and how many victims would there be?

As Yoshino's fist balled in his lap, he saw the headlights of an approaching car. Yoshino ordered for the driver to slow. He leaned out of the window and waved his hand in a wide motion at the approaching car.

It was an unremarkable station wagon. As the two came closer, they stopped over the center line. Yoshino opened the door and leaned halfway out. The driver of the station wagon rolled down the window.

"Hey you, did you come from Sotoba's direction?" Yoshino's voice carried on the wind. He didn't see anything in the wind that resembled ash or smoke, but the air was mixed with the distinct, burnt stench of a fire.

The driver gave a disinterested nod in response to Yoshino's question. He appeared to be in his mid-twenties to mid-thirties. In the low light his facial expression couldn't be made out clearly but he didn't seem to be in any sort of disarray. But, his face and clothes were filthy as if he had been rolling in mud. For just a moment, Yoshino thought that dirt was splattered blood. It was surely just that the light reflecting off of mud made it look like blood. ---That had to be it.

"What's happened to Sotoba? Do you know anything?"

The driver's voice was lacking in emotion (perhaps from exhaustion) and quiet but it carried on the wind.

"It is a wild fire. Fire started on the northern mountains and came down to the village."

Yoshino groaned. "How big?"

"It's horrible. Embers are falling like snow."

---It was the true and honest worst case scenario.

"What was the Sotoba branch doing?" someone was heard cursing. The other members reported to headquarters. Yoshino raised his hand in thanks to the driver. The driver drove on. While closing the fire engine's door to do the same, seeing the station wagon off, Yoshino swallowed in a gasp.

In the backseat of the car was stored a coffin. It was only for a moment, but it was so distinct that his eyes were drawn to it. Indeed, it was a simple wooden casket. The image was fully burned into his eyes; the back seat was fully reclined to accommodate its size, and a cloth of some sort was wrapped around half of the coffin, which had one small window, with double doors adorned with tassels.

Yoshino saw the car off, mouth agape. For a moment he thought to chase after and yell at them to stop but his shoulders quickly eased. ---Yes, a casket. There was nothing wrong with that.

Sotoba was originally a village founded for the creation of sotoba and caskets. Judging by the driver's appearance, the scene was clearly chaotic. He may have just grabbed whatever was on hand at his shop, the coffin, and packed in his valuables to flee, or maybe it was a coffin that was previously packed into the car for delivery.

He still felt somehow uncomfortable but it was no time to get caught up too deeply in that. More important to Yoshino than a station wagon with a coffin in it was the fact that Sotoba had many woodworking plants and sawmills.

The fire engine was again heading north on the national highway.

They passed beneath the expressway's overpass, taking the single curve along the mountain stream and drove higher bit by bit until they could see an unobstructed view of the village of Sotoba.

Looking at it straight on, one face of the northern mountain was already in flames. He could tell that the red flames had completely overtaken the territory beneath the man-made forests. The reason the mountain ridges had appeared black was because it was in shadow, illuminated by the other side of the mountain. The origin of the fire must have been further north in Sotoba, and the other side of the mountain may have already been wrapped in flame.

The smell of the fire reeked inside of the fire engine, smoke wafting in. Before their horrified eyes, flames rose over the block of the mountain. The firs fell to the flames. The buildings on the northern slant were already enveloped, and the headlights of cars escaping the area drifted like will-o-the-wisps.

Sparks fell. No, it wasn't as simple and gentle as to be described by the word 'fall.' It was like a blizzard fanned on by the fierce winds.

It was a more disastrous scene than they imagined, and he heard those who road with him raise their voices and groan. What did anyone think one single pump truck rushing on to the scene could do?

--Of course, there was nothing at all that they could do.

This disaster wasn't the start of something, it was a demise. This past summer everything had been progressing to this state in secrecy; this was the culmination of all of those threads.

No, according to some, it had started even before that---the past year, no, maybe even further back than that. At any rate, the unavoidable began in the summer, on the early dawn of July 24th.

Already on that day, it was half set in stone that the village known as Sotoba would be wrapped in the one thousand hectares of mountain forest that surrounded it and annihilated.

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The desolate earth froze solid over itself into countless meandering ridges.
The grey sky hung low, the universe split perfectly in two parts, the clouds and the earth.
All that traversed the two was the wind, like a blade; there was no light in the sky, to say nothing of the earth. Nevertheless, a pure splendor closed in on him from behind, and as he bowed his face low to avoid the wind, before his line of sight was cast a long, deep crimson shadow.

He didn't know whether the red that tinted that shadow was the earth itself or whether it was an effect of the curse he carried in himself. What he did know was that it would be bound to his ankles eternally, until the day he died and decomposed into refuse, it would probably never leave him. No, even after he rotted away, perhaps the slivers of waste would continue to cast their own crimson shadows.
All that moved on that deserted and desolate earth were he and the spirits of the dead. His forehead bore a mark and as the dead spirits did not know its meaning, they blew cold winds his way, or they would spit poison at him, or with their half transparent hands they would throw pebbles.
----You cursed wretch.
The dead spirits kept their distance but still, transparent, stalked after him. No matter how dull it may have been the light of day showed their hazy forms. Though they had no shadows, their voices carried clearly on the wind.
---You cursed wretch.
---Outcast.
Under the weight their jeering voices and at the stones that rolled beneath his feet, he fell--how many times was this now?--to the cold, hard earth, like a stone.
He pushed both hands to the ground to raise himself up, first peeking beyond his arms to the brilliant light. Situated atop the low hill, the greenery of the hill shone far and wide. The hometown to

which he could never return was there, emanating its distant glow. The light at the peak of the hill spread light and love over that entire hill, the greenery a warm, glowing hue, but on this earth there was nothing cast but shadows.
This was the land of wanderers; the vegetation fostered by this light would never flourish here. A cold that seemed to freeze solid even the wind itself pierced him, without so much as a hair's measure of that warmth coming down. That light only served to cast relief of the hobbled texture of this land, to cast shadows--dense, shadows the color of sin, garnishing anything and everything.
----Outcast.
Again, the stones and pebbles came flying. He closed his eyes and stood up with a single breath but, unable to forget the light that seared itself into his pupils, beneath his eyelids, when he opened his terrified eyes this time, the splendid sight's radiance reflected still on the clouds.
The day grew dim yet the clothing of the spirits of the dead remained vivid, by the brilliant light behind him that itself did not dim. He had done nothing but walk for countless days now through the wasteland and yet, the light never weakened, his hometown on the hilltop never faded beyond the dips and rises of the earth behind him. He did naught but walk. He struggled and yearned for a place where neither the hill nor the light would be seen.
Before long before him was a human figure, faint and white. It had been there since before, waiting for him. Pallid blue will-o-the-wisps wavered, gathering as a shadow at his feet.
He gasped as he made out the features of that figure. It meant that night had come again.
This was the appointed time for it to come to the wasteland.
It followed him, and until the clamor of the dead spirits came with the dawn, it was unlikely to leave his side. He already knew that he could neither escape it nor drive it off. Without choice, he walked. Whether he stood still or whether he changed directions, he would surely end up reaching its side.
He himself without intent took a narrow walk step by step, until the figure's contours wee clear. His feet stopped and he covered his face.
That was his brother who he had slain. It was his little brother, born after him, the little brother to whom everything he himself had wanted had come so easily.

He buried his brother in the ground, and within a fortnight all greenery was eliminated. He'd meant to bury his sorrows together with that corpse on the hill. The light of the splendor that shone over the grave dimmed with sadness, and the surrounding trees and flowers bloomed only at night, the birds in the branches wailing only the same song.
It came, revived from the grave again tonight.
----A Shiki.

Having written that much, Seishin gave a sigh. In that moment the tension eased as he was thrown from the frigid wasteland back into the middle of the summer night.
The temperature seemed to rise instantly. Seishin released his pencil. The old style lacquer hexagon rolled above the wasteland confined to the squares of the writing paper, reflecting the light of the lamp. The traditional Japanese writing paper spread out over the inorganic clerical desk that wore the reflection of the lamp like an egg yolk and from the window at the side of the desk, the summer temperature and the sound of insects flowed into the room.
Sunday, July 24. The date had just changed, and Muroi Seishin was just shy of 33. He was a monk and an author. Facing his desk in the temple office, before his eyes was spread the manuscript that had come from about five hours of transcription.
Seishin sighed again, taking up the sheet of paper he had just filled. He looked over the letters he had written into the squares from the beginning.
The lively hum of insects flowed in through the temple office window. Loud as that should have seemed, the room was mysteriously stagnant with silence. In the old styled room, beneath the light that just barely covered the whole of the desk, there was only himself with his head bent down towards the manuscript, closing himself off to all else. Behind him silently stood the steel desk and office supplies. The head monk's family slept in their quarters. The temple that held them in its breast was filled with emptiness in the space beyond that, all human presence cut out.
Surrounding the temple was a forest of fir trees. The temple was on a mountainside covered with firs, with no adjacent houses. The village spread out beneath the view of the temple was itself alone in the mountains, closed in by fir trees. Such overlapping layers of

isolation were pooled within the temple office.
(The little brother, he feels for him...)
Seishin returned the paper to the desktop with another faint sigh. He took a box cutter from the office desk and took up the abandoned pencil, running the blade along it. The pencil shavings fell onto the manuscript he had just engrossed himself in.

The little brother had become a Shiki in death but he was by no means a vengeful ghost, much less by any means an evil apparition. The little brother had simply risen from the grave, that's all. Thus the little brother, just as when he was alive, oozed with compassion towards him. But there's nothing that can torment a criminal more than a victim who commiserates with his assailant. He anguished in his little brother's compassion.

----And did what, then?
Seishin could only ponder, following the story he could only follow vaguely, until at last he was caught up in confusion at its ambiguity, losing sight of where it was going.
While repeatedly fumbling for something in his writing, he shaved the long end of the pencil down to a precise point. The lead was 2H; he had a habit of writing characters as if engraving them with the hard pencil. So while he used a pencil, he didn't use an eraser. The way he used it, the characters wouldn't disappear so when it came time to erase something, he'd end up ruining the paper itself.
(The murdered little brother rises from the grave every night.)

That compassionate little brother's older brother attained the title of murderer when he took up a weapon against him. More than himself who had been killed, he sympathizes with the older brother who killed him.

That's why he became a Shiki and pursues his older brother. He has to follow his brother who had become a sinner wandering the wastelands to his final destination.

This was not a curse driven by affection.

The little brother who became a Shiki doesn't know that he's tormenting his older brother. The older brother knows as much. And---where is this going?

As he thought, he sharpened the pencil to a point and went on sharpening the other pencils he had used that night. Much as he hated dull tips, he couldn't simply keep sharpening them constantly, so he kept a dozen of them reliably in a pencil tray to trade out whenever the tip became rounded.

The rainy season had ended but the stillness of the night that seemed to flow piercingly into the room had nothing to do with the heat. Rather, one would feel a chill in a short sleeved shirt. A mountain town laid out along the mountain stream was not one fated to sultry summer nights. There was a notable difference from the town he had lived in while going to college. In his dormitory room without air conditioning, just sitting at his desk would have him dripping sweat. Just like now, he would be bent over the writing paper into the dead of night, when a bead of sweat would smear the ink, making him wince; he'd stopped using pens. For ten years since, he'd used hard, thin lined pencils.

Which editor was it that had mentioned with surprise 'You still use Japanese writing paper?' Seishin replied that his nature didn't mesh well with machines. He'd tried buying a word processor but he ultimately ended up giving it to his father. He didn't hate precisely pounding out the letters but somehow he didn't like the way that they could be easily redone.

Filling out each square on the traditional Japanese paper was similar to taking a path without being able to retrace one's steps. If you lose yourself in a dead end, you'll have to return to a branch road. And then, step by step, he wrote as if traversing a maze by foot, a way of doing things that was most like himself. It took time but, Seishin was first and foremost a monk after all, so writing was nothing more than a side business. He was never enough of a top seller that publishers would press him to hurry in finishing his manuscripts, and he likely never would be. Things had gone this way for ten years and while he didn't mind, he didn't doubt that it would continue like this from now on.

Finished sharpening his last pencil, he gathered the shavings in the middle of the paper and folded it around them. He folded the paper into itself so as not to spill what was in it before putting it in the wastebasket. Because of his habit of handling anything and

everything this way, his mother and others had laughed that they couldn't tell if he were throwing something away or storing it away. Spreading out a fresh sheet of paper, Seishin stood up. He was getting faint goose bumps. As he moved to close the window, as if frightened by Seishin's shadow, the bugs suddenly ceased chirping. Because of that, he faintly heard the vague sound of a gong sounding. The sound which sounded like a preparation to flee, which sounded melancholy, was the sound of the mushiokuri bells. Seishin smiled faintly at the clear notes of the bells. Night fell fast on the village. At a time when most would already be asleep, so many people set out, still making a hustle and bustle, continuing the night's festival. Long ago, he had a feeling that the night held a secret. He had had a feeling if he could follow those men who dawned their masks and went on parade, he would find it. Unfortunately Seishin was over thirty and he knew the truth of what hid in the night. But even now many children probably followed after the procession, rubbing their sleepy eyes, in search of something. He remained unaware that with that thought, the year before, or the year before that, he too had believed that something had to be out there as the sound of the bell jolted through his chests.
He looked casually out at the village, sunken into the darkness. The dotting of houses and street lamps could not wipe away the darkness. Maybe it was because of those very forlornly sparse points of light that the village was all the darker. The darkness that towered as if to consume the village was made up of mountain ridges covered with firs. The stars spread out vividly across the tabernacle of the sky, immeasurably brighter than the view down at the mountain village.

The village is surrounded by death.

The firs were death. The villagers still buried their dead here. The dead who harbored regrets or resentments would rise from the grave and linger, bringing calamity. The village called them "Oni." Death would infect those touched by the Oni. Humans and livestock would die and crops would wither. The Oni come when children cry, parents would tell their children in the past, and even now. The Risen, corpses that spread death as they lingered. They awoke

within the firs, coming down from the darkness of the mountains swarming towards the sparse lights, towards those who were engrossed in their dreams.
(This darkness...)

Behold this darkness.
The stars above the mountain rage.
What is the darkness, compared to the splendor of the stars? The sage upon the hilltop pointed to the wasteland.
This is the darkness of avidya, of ignorance, this darkness is filthy and cursed.
Saying this as he motioned, the sage pushed him from behind. He staggered on the bellows of his feet out into the wasteland, the narrow golden gate closing behind him.

Seishin shook his head and rested his hand on the window.
Since he had started it, he had been harboring doubts, doubts about being unable to see the end point of this story, doubts about why he started writing this story at all. Bits and pieces fell into place, bit by bit, obscuring the focus of the story.
Seishin smiled bitterly at himself and moved to close the window when from that direction, just barely breaking through the darkness was a glowing point of light. From years of experience, Seishin knew that he was looking at the divergence from the national highway to the road along the river. The lights moved. It must have been a car.
Furrowing his brows, he checked his watch. At some point it had become 3:00AM. The lights in the village went out as they would and the sound of the bells grew more lonesome as they would, the climax of the festival having passed and going into its denouement. Villagers couldn't participate in the denouement. Being a ceremony to ward off insects and plagues, the people could only see them off, unable to be present for the ending. The only ones who could be present were those "inhuman" ones who dawned the masks.
(At this hour...)
The light came from the highway directly towards the town. From a distance it could still be told that they were the headlights of three cars.
The reason he watched over the sight so intently may have been

because how rare it was to see a car coming to or leaving the village at that hour.
Three car lights were...

Drawing arcs in the darkness, as if drifting, they traveled the land. A beckoning, invoked by the the dead who rose from the grave, he who dispatched the will-o'-the-wisps.

Seishin shook his head brushing off the phrase that had floated to mind.
As he casually closed the window, he noticed the lights had stopped.

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The mountain village was coated jet black, even the asphalt roads lost to the darkness. There were streetlights lining the roads but the lights were dimmed, with little more light from them than the reflection of the night dew. The faintest light splayed on the asphalt, hazily bringing out the white line that denoted the roadway.

Beyond the white line that looked as if it were being sucked into the darkness was a gloomy glow. At the side of the road, near the bridge, a shrine was erected. Countless candles stood around the hokora's stone Jizo, flames flickering in a wind that may or may not have been blowing. That shadowy light shone on the expressionless, half-lidded statue and the oddity that stood beside it.

It was a sotoba about the height of a child.

On the face of the sotoba was a cramped, glued on cut out of a white paper doll. The candle lights crosshatched patterns across the paper dolls, the lights flickering on the paper, shadows dancing as if the doll were writhing. ---Far away, the bell tolled.

The sotoba waited. Illuminated by the lights offered to God, awash in the voices of the insects and frogs, waiting there among the noises mixed then with the faint sound of the bell, it stood in silence.

From the darkness the sound of the bells drew closer. The pounding of drums, vigorous as if as necessary as breath, sounded. There was the dry, pounding noise and a crowd's footsteps.

The wind blew, swaying the candles. The dancing light and

shadows changed the Jizo's expression. At last torch light appeared over the hokora.

Black shadows leaped up from the ridges between the rice fields to the asphalt. The numerous flames drew circles in the darkness, beating together and joining with a clash and a shatter of red embers. Those falling lights illuminated their grotesque forms.

They wore masks with short white cloths beneath them. Black monk robes. The Oni who covered their face with old fashioned hand towels carried many huge planks of sotoba on their backs. As they danced, the paper dolls crammed onto the child sized sotoba swayed.

The sounds of the insects were cut short as if seized with fear. The sound of the gongs, the sound of the drums, the sounds of the torches beating together mingled with the sound of the mountain stream. The bullfrogs' croaks were clearer than the sound of the insects.

The Oni waved the torches, their offerings. Bearing down under the weight of the sotoba, they still took what were either long strides forward or small leaps, they bobbed up and down, sounding the bells and the drums as they swaggered over the night streets. The Oni at the head of the procession shouldered a straw figure about the size of a child, crucified at the highest point at the end of the rod.

The red Oni came to the front, waving the effigy like a keyari and stopped before the hokora. There were about twenty Oni who followed after, banging their torches, leaping and dancing past. Sweeping up the offering before the Jizo, they descended the stone steps towards the river valley. The red Oni with the effigy took up the sotoba from the side of the hokora and followed after. In the river valley where the water level was low were three effigies prepared and waiting to be burnt.

The bells and the drums fell silent as if they'd finally solved their crisis, muttering off to a finish that washed over them with a sigh of relief.

"Thanks for your hard work, men!"

An old man called out with a distinctly clear voice. One man took off his mask and sighed heavily.

"Good grief."

Following in suit, about twenty others shed their masks and lowered their burdens. The effigies, the sotoba, piled over the open air fire as if to hide the flames within the small mountain they formed. They chucked their torch lights on top of that pile, offered to the gods. The flames mingled and overtook the dolls, forming one single blaze that shone over the river valley and the faces of the surrounding people.

Seeing the others had done so, Yuuki at last took off his Oni mask. Giving a heavy sigh of relief that at last his torment was over, he took a seat on a nearby rock. He covered his face with a hand towel, wiping away the sweat and shaking his head to wash his face in the night breeze.

"Whew, good work."

Yuuki turned his head towards the voice to find a beer thrust out towards him, which he did take. As he wiped at his face with the black cloth, the man in the strange getup gave him a broad smile, and he couldn't stop a smile from welling up himself at the peculiarity of that disguise, even after all of this.

Mutou may have guessed the reason for Yuuki's smile, going "Ah," as he took his hand towel. Wiping at his sweat with a beer still in one hand, he took a seat next to Yuuki. Mutou's face was red. The man was normally the very picture of sober propriety but on the rare occasions he was of particularly good humor, you could be sure he was drunk. He must have found marauding around town to be a fitting occasion for drink. The beer he was brought was wet in his warm hand. It must have been dunked in the river to cool it.

"So? Bet you're worn out." Mutou spoke,

Yuuki nodded.

"This is what they mean when they say your legs are stiff as rods. I didn't think the mushiokuri would be this big of a thing."

"It's hard labor, being a yuge-shuu. The first time I was a part of the yuge-shuu, I can't remember how many times I thought about giving up halfway and running home," said Mutou with a laugh. "But, well, this's what the men do. Until you take part in the festival, you're just a visitor."

Yuuki nodded.

Yuuki moved to this village--to Sotoba--about a year ago. It wasn't that he had any family here. He had just wanted to move to the country and so he had an acquaintance make arrangements for a house in Sotoba. But there weren't many who came to Sotoba that way. At least as far as Yuuki knew, there was only Mutou, here. Mutou worked in the business office of the one and only hospital in the village. It seemed he moved into a house in Sotoba from nearby about the time his oldest child was in middle school. It wasn't as if nobody ever moved in from the surrounding neighborhoods but, those who did tended to have blood ties to the town. In that sense, Yuuki and Mutou were oddities.

"Is that so, this year is Yuuki-san's first time?" It was a quiet voice. The man was seated on a nearby stone and was looking to Yuuki. "Well, then, it really will wear you down, won't it?"

"Indeed," nodded Yuuki as he remembered, he was fairly certain, that the man was Hirosawa, a teacher at the middle school. "But with this out of the way I finally feel like I'm a member of the village proper now, too."

As Yuuki spoke, Hirosawa took another beer in hand and came closer.

"It will be about one year won't it, since Yuuki-san moved here? To open an art studio, wasn't it?"

"It isn't something that fancy. Azusa--that is, my wife and I do carve wood furniture, and dye and weave cloth---but really, it's just a place for us to do that in."

Hirosawa smiled, but Mutou made a face and thrust his can out at Yuuki.

"That right there! You and your wife being complicated, keeping separate names, that's why it took a whole year to get involved in the rituals. Villagers can't understand that kind of progressive thing."

Yuuki forced a smile. Their houses were somewhat nearby and Mutou had looked over him since they'd first moved in but as soon as liquor was added to the mix, conversation would turn to this topic.

He lived with Azusa as a family without marrying her, without entering her in his family register. Azusa refused to change her family name. He understood her feelings and Yuuki himself had a few doubts about the institution known as marriage, so there was no need to enter her into the family register. He didn't call her his wife, he called her his housemate. They did have one son but the way things ended up was that their son was entered under Azusa's family census, with Yuuki's approval. It seemed the people of Sotoba couldn't understand that at all. Apparently the speculations about them ran wild when they'd first moved in.

"Ah well, the villagers seem used to it now, so isn't it fine?" Hirosawa smiled gently. "Your son is certainly coming along, isn't he. He's gotten so big---this year, he started high school, if I'm not mistaken?"

"Yes. We had my son while in college. Did you look after my son at the middle school?"

"No, I had no connections to him. Just, sixteen, huh? He's at the age where he should understand his parent now, isn't he!"

"That he is," Yuuki laughed. When he was smaller, there would be misunderstandings and it seemed like he was picked on and he'd complain that he wanted them to get married properly but, ever since he'd entered middle school he hadn't said anything of the sort. Yuuki took that to mean that he finally understood what his parents aim had been.

"With that kind of life style, aren't there a lot of parts of country life that don't sit well with you? For example, women not taking part in the ceremonies or such."

Yuuki shook his head lightly at Hirosawa's question.

"It isn't like that. It's not as if Azusa and I think we should lash out against anything old fashioned or anything like that. If anything we're moved by it all, since we were both outsiders born in the city, without any connections to festivals or religious services or local customs and the like."

"You're moved?"

"Indeed so---or should I saw awestruck? It's the feeling that comes with thinking 'I'm really and genuinely experiencing this.' That's the sort of thing we moved here seeking. Well, Azusa might have been a little put out. She said that even though it was the festival at last, if she wasn't a yuge-shuu she couldn't really see it out until the end, she says."

At Yuuki's answer, Hirosawa's voice rose in a quiet laugh.

"I see."

"She pouted 'why don't women become yuge-shuu' but, this, at least, would have to be all men. This calls for physical strength more than anything."

"Yes, indeed." Hirosawa smiled. "It's sweltering hot and we're in these costumes. On top of that, we put on these masks and dance from one end of the village to the other."

"Tell me about it. ---Is there any significance to dressing in a monk's robes like this?"

"The word yuge-shuu comes from the yugyou shounin or wandering monk. That would be why we wear the monk's black robes, I'd imagine."

"A wandering monk?"

"That big straw effigy," Hirosawa said turning his eyes to the rising blaze of the bonfire. "Is called the Betto. It seems that's an effigy of the Betto---I don't know so much about it myself, I was told as much by the Junior Monk."

Hearing Junior Monk, Yuuki turned from the riverbed lit by the bonfire towards the mountains. The village of Sotoba was surrounded on three sides by mountain ridges, and on the slope was the main temple, the heir of which also had a side job as a writer. Yuuki had yet to obtain any of his writings but amongst the villagers, opinions on it seemed tinged with cynicism. They wouldn't say it too loudly, but somebody had called it 'kind of fastidious.' That they could say that with such a warm tone of voice may have been either because having a writer from the village at all was a point of pride or because of their respect and affection held towards the temple's son.

"In old farming villages, it was believed that insects and illnesses were because of evil spirits. During the Hougen Rebellion, there was a military leader called Saitou Sanemori."

"The Rebellion in the Heian period?"

"Yes. That Saitou Sanemori was also called Nagai Betto, you see. He was originally a military commander for the Minamoto Clan but later turned to the Heike clan. Sanemori went to the west to suppress Minamoto's General Yoshinaka and was defeated in the Battle of Shinohara in Kaga, they say because he stumbled over a rice plant stump. The legend that he bore a grudge and became a horde of insects that devoured rice plants spread through Japan, so it seems to have become a custom to offer memorial services to Sanemori's spirit during the mushiokuri."

"Heh? So the Betto--that's Saitou Betto?"

"It's written in an old document that the ghost of Sanemori appeared in the village of Shinowara in Kaga before a wandering monk of the Ji-sect who performed his mourning ceremonies. There's the Noh play 'Sanemori' that's written about this topic as well. The legend must have been passed around in those days. That's why the Betto's attendants are wandering monks, yugyou

shounin, but we say it yuge-shuu, according to the Junior Monk, anyway."

"But still, why Oni masks?"

"Ah, that," Hirosawa laughed. "In Sotoba we have an Oni called The Risen."

"The Risen?"

"Yes. We bury here, yes? So we have folk tales about the dead rising from their graves and coming down to haunt the village. We call them Oni. It doesn't make sense for the wanderers who mourned the Betto to be Oni but there are his attendants who wear not only the priest's robes, but Oni masks. They pray to him and then cast him away. That's the mushiokuri."

"Pray and cast him away----" Yuuki looked to the fire. "This is to say, we burn him."

The yuge-shuu carried the Betto. While the Betto itself was only made of straw, it was still rather heavy. It was paraded through the plowed lands and the mountain forests of the village. He had heard that the impurities of the surroundings would flow into it. The others were there to shoulder the weight of Sotoba as they uppoed. Uppo was the footwork performed by the yuge-shuu as they danced and paraded through every nook and cranny of the village purifying it further with each step. Carrying the child sized planks of the sotoba from one hokora to the next while uppoing was truly heavy labor.

"Do we use sotoba because this place is called Sotoba?"

He had heard that the village's name of Sotoba came from the sotoba grave. Hirosawa gave a quiet nod in answer to Yuuki's question.

"The village came to be for the purpose of raising firs and making them into sotoba."

In the past week those big sotoba were planted at the hokora scattered here and there. The people purchased the paper dolls from

the shrine and wrote names on them, praying at their household shrines, passing their sins and filth onto them and cramming them onto the sotoba, offering piles of sake and food in a memorial service. The wanderers lapped the village gathering up those offerings. To be perfectly honest, it didn't sit well with him, the sotoba with the paper dolls jammed onto them. Or at least, the first time he had set eyes on the sight, he thought that he'd seen something he wasn't supposed to have seen.

"It must seem in bad taste if you're not used to it."

Yuuki gave a bitter smile, as Hirosawa spoke as if reading his mind.

"I was surprised at first. What's worse is that the Oni dressed like that were parading around with torch lights--it was more like a black magic ritual or a curse than a festival."

"A curse and a prayer are the same thing in the end. They're both supernatural. The mushiokuri could also technically be called contact with the dead. We pray the spirits away so as not to be cursed by them. The relation between man and the gods is colder than one would expect."

"Aboriginal religious festivals might have been just like this."

Hirosawa nodded. At some point, Mutou, beer can gripped in hand, had nodded off.

"Since we worship and cast it away, we can't wear the masks on the return trip. The Oni were chased out of the village. In the past, it seems they used to even bathe in the river and change clothes. But that could be dangerous when liquor's involved, so that tradition died out."

"I see. ---Then it's changed, hasn't it."

Thinking he heard disappointment in his words, Hirosawa made an apologetic expression.

"Originally the mushiokuri was meant to take place in the hottest days of the summer, but now it's set on the night of a Saturday right

around there. If we didn't, then working men wouldn't be able to take part. Without those kinds of changes, it wouldn't take place at all anymore."

"Oh, no, I only meant that while it's conforming to the status quo, it's still carrying on. It couldn't be called a real and live festival if it was just a matter of preserving an old tradition because it's old, would it?" Yuuki quickly supplemented, earning a smile from Hirosawa.

"I don't know about all that. --Well, if you compare us to the surrounding villages, we would probably have more remnants. Sotoba is a bit unique. Even amongst the other villages around here, we're a singularity."

"Is that so?"

"It was a village opened by lumberjacks who came from other places, so much it's called the 'other' or 'outside' Soto-, 'place' -ba. In truth, it wasn't really even consolidated enough to call a village, but the people of Sotoba said 'village' and people from outside said 'village'. Maybe there's some understanding that we mustn't become too much of a mixed bunch. People rarely come and they don't leave. That's what sort of place it is, this place."

"Then, I'm an oddity in an oddity," Yuuki said as Hirosawa laughed.

"What? Now that you've experience being a yuge-shuu, you're one of the village. It's going to be trouble you know, there are things that need to be done, you'll be assigned your role so to speak, and the leading and supporting actors have to have a hand in the physical labor."

"The yuge-shuu don't change?"

"Since you had participated this year, you'll likely be invited next year too. It isn't something you absolutely have to do but, who's going to participate is more or less decided. From the gong and taiko drums to the uppo, there's a way things are done."

"I see."

Yuuki forced a smile. As a man going on forty, practicing dancing was embarrassing, if he did say so himself.

"It goes Kami-Naka-Monzen, Shimo-Soto-Mizuguchi."

"What does that mean?"

"The village of Sotoba is made up of six subdivisions. Kami-Sotoba or Upper Sotoba, Naka-Sotoba or Mid-Sotoba, Monzen or Gatefront, Shimo-Sotoba or Lower Sotoba, Sotoba, and Mizuguchi or Waterspout. There's actually one more, a settlement set off a bit in the mountains called Yamairi or Mountain Entrance."

"I heard there weren't many left there, but…?"

"Indeed. There are only two houses left. Well, there's an upper and lower part of Yamairi itself that are assigned works. The organization of shrine members is called the Miyaza or Shrine Parish Guild but, if duties aren't assigned by the Miyaza, duties flow from the top down. That was the case, though things have changed. Lately houses have sprung up along the highway and the lower part's become bigger but in the past, it was nothing but rice fields. -- The lower part is in charge of the Chinese New Year and the Shinkousai festival done right before the mushiokuri. That's quite heavy labor itself but, since we're in charge of the New Year's toshigamisai and the mushiokuri, we just watch those."

"Heh?"

"Even a village as small as this is wider than you'd expect. It's not just the religious rituals, all village events are handled top-bottom. The smaller events are handled by individual territories. Congratulatory or consolatory events are done on a smaller scale, you see. With the village subdivided as it is, your role is more or less decided, no matter what. At that event, he will be the one with the bell, at that event, he will be the palanquin bearer, and so on and so forth."

"I see. Then, to prepare for next year's mushiokuri, I'll have to build up a little endurance," Yuuki laughed, Hirosawa's own light laugh joining in.

"Where is your house, Hirosawa-san?"

"The same as you, Yuuki-san. Naka-Sotoba."

"Is that right. --Then be sure to stop by sometime."

"Likewise," said Hirosawa with a smile as Mutou raised his head. It seemed he woke up from his doze.

"……A car."

Yuuki and Hirosawa both took a look at Mutou's face, then up at the bank.

From the village entrance, that is to say the south, they could see headlights.

"Hahaa, wrong road, I bet," said Mutou, his enunciation hazy. He may have been right. The car lingered there as if bewildered, and slowly, bit by bit started to turn back.

Mutou squinted, expectant, and Hirosawa knitted his brows. Maybe Yuuki himself was making a similar expression. ----That was a cargo truck they saw. The back container was rather large. The car behind it was in the truck's shadow and couldn't be well seen.

The yuge-shuu surrounding the bonfire were all surprised, turning their backs to the flame to see the truck depart.

"Are they moving...? At this hour." Mutou's voice was half surprised, half doubtful. Yuuki nodded for the time being, for some reason turning to look at the backdrop. Against the sky with stars dotted like grains of sand, the looming mounds of the mountain range were simple blackness. The village was wedged between that blackness, where the upper mountain streams converged. As if trapped in by the merging mountain ranges, an especially large mountain range rose in the depths. Immediately to the left of that northern mountain, in the northwest of the village, the northern

and western mountains convened. Yuuki knew as well as anyone in the village that there was a single residence there, one awaiting its master.

Since the truck turned back, it was probably unrelated to that house. ---But.

Maybe they were thinking the same thing; as soon as he thought to look, he realized that not only Mutou and Hirosawa but the yuge-shuu surrounding the bonfire were all doing the same, looking up to the northwest mountain.

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The air was a diluted indigo, the green of the firs on the mountain surface coming out of their pitch blackness. The silence, wrapped in morning dew, gave birth to the cries of mountain doves. Seishin exited the head priest's quarters with a broom in hand, onto the temple grounds awash in blue light, in white light. The sky couldn't be seen through the haze of morning dew. Looking as if it were etched with diluted ink, the stone pathway spread out, the temple gate that rose beyond it a blot of deep black.
The turtledoves murmured, but those murmurings seemed unusually well enunciated, sharp in the ear as Seishin crossed the temple grounds, the very picture of tranquility, towards the temple gate. The fulcrum of the gate he rested the broom against was also damp. He extracted the bolt that was profoundly moist and, just as he was opening the gates from the inside, the entrance beside the gate front opened. The one who entered the side door, back bent, going 'Oh ho?' as his eyes narrowed as if spying something amusing was Mitsuo.
"Good morning."
Just as Mitsuo bowed his completely receded hairline in greeting, Seishin gave his own greeting at that same moment. Their voices overlapped. Mitsuo's laughed out loud, perhaps finding that funny as well.
Tadokoro Mitsuo did odd jobs around the temple. He wasn't a monk, so he didn't chant sutras, but he took on all sorts of various tasks. Every day, he'd come from his home at the base of the mountain and pass the whole day breaking down whatever jobs needed to be done. Along with his mother who helped out in the office, the family was a part of the temple, and Seishin couldn't recall a single day to his memory that Mitsuo hadn't been seen here.
"It seems today will be hot again," said Mitsuo, taking hold of one of the gate doors. That was when he tilted his head, taking a look at Seishin's face. "Junior Monk, your eyes are red. Let me guess, staying up late again?"
Having it pointed out by Mitsuo, Seishin gave an ashamed nod. His father had a cerebral hemorrhage last year, and since then Seishin

had taken over the management of the temple but, due to his side job, he kept many late nights. Morning at the temple was around five o'clock so, there were plenty of times when he'd go without sleep altogether.
"Will you be all right? Aren't there quite a few memorial services today?"
From the Saturday of the Mushiokuri or rather from to the early hours of its Sunday morning, maybe even from the preceding Shinkousai to please the gods, the village was focused on summer Shinto rituals. During that time, everyone put off the Buddhist memorial services while the Bon festival to see off the dead quickly approached. The half month between the mushiokuri and the Bon Feast of Lanterns would always be busy with arrangements for memorial services. Today was heavily booked as well. There were two monks taking charge of services, and during busy times the head monk from the neighboring temple would come so in theory there were substitutes, but the acting head monk of the temple couldn't very well take a shameless daytime nap.
"If you're so inclined, how about asking Tsurumi-san to oversee the services and getting a bit of sleep?"
Tsurumi was a monk who came in from the village. Seishin quickly shook his head.
"No, I'm all right."
"It's going to be a busy season, so we need you to take care of yourself. Please, rest. I will make arrangements with Tsurumi-san."
"I really am fine."
"If you're sure," murmured Mitsuo as he took the bamboo broom in hand, a figure ascending the front temple steps visible through the morning haze. It was Chiyo of the general store at the base of the steps. The old woman carried a broom in place of a cane, sweeping step by step as she climbed the stairway, turning towards Seishin and Mitsuo with a silent and formal bow.
"Good morning."
"You're early as always."
When Seishin and Mitsuo called out, Chiyo gave another wordless bow.
About how old was she now, that old woman of few words and scant expressions? Seishin had seen her every morning since he was a child but he had had so few conversations with her, they could probably even be counted by memory. This was her burden to bear,

a free service provided; the time she had spoken of it with embarrassment still left a profound impression on him. She had promised to the Buddha that if her husband returned safely from the war, she would clean. That husband had passed on long ago but Chiyo herself was still healthy and every morning came in said good health, sweeping the steps that lead to the front gate, attending the morning services, then returning home.
Faith was alive in the village. The elderly in the neighborhood would come to every morning service, many handling the odd jobs around the temple. It certainly had the appearance of a temple in a village where the grand majority of the villagers were parishioners who supported the temple, being a very large variety of temple. Even with three monks, Mitsuo and his mother Katsue, Seishin and his mother Miwako, there weren't enough people to manage it. To put it simply, the temple could not function without the families that supported it.
With another light nod at Chiyo who silently began sweeping, Seishin took up his own broom again.
The temple was at the northernmost point of the village, on a fir covered southern facing slope of a northern mountain. He could take in the spread of the village through the morning haze at a glance from the mountain gate.
Sotoba was packed into a triangle between complicated mountain ridges.

The village spread around the mountain stream is contained in a triangle like the tip of a harpoon by a forest of firs.

Seishin had used such a simile to describe Sotoba's terrain. The tip of the harpoon was like an arrow drawn on the map denoting north. The northern mountain was situated at the tip of that, and the temple looked down over the village from that spot. The ridges that spread off of the northern mountain formed the western bank of the village, which made a right angled turn capping the south. At the shaft of the arrow was the eastern spur, running parallel to the flow of the mountain stream. The temple was at the summit of the triangle, facing the southern ridges with the highway beyond them, the expressway piercing through the south. That was the southern boundary of the village.

From where Seishin was at, at the temple gate, he could survey it all at a glance. Wedged between spurs of mountains, it spread out like a paper fan with the temple as a base, covered in fields and houses. Some houses were spread out, some were crammed together into communities, all gradually descending to and opening out to the southern mountain spurs. Looking out over it, it was as if the whole lot could be held in the palm of his hand.
Seishin narrowed his eyes as he heard a sound like a scream emitting from the scooter that scaled the mountain. Riding up the private pathway, coming from the side of belfry side of the temple towards the temple grounds was the temple monk Tsurumi. Tsurumi, in his black robes with his helmet still on, gave Seishin a nod and continued towards the grounds. Seishin returned his greeting and lowered his eyes to the stone path. Broom gripped in hand, he devoted himself to sweeping.
When the schedule was busy, after the morning services, Sumi would come from the neighboring temple and Mitsuo's mother Katsue would come to help in the office. Just before noon, the temple monk Ikebe returned to the temple from his off season summer vacation.
The busy day passed, Seishin headed to the meditation dojo, an enclosure within the priest's family quarters. He met his mother just at the entrance, bringing a tray with tea cups and tea cakes. Behind Miwako was Mitsuo, a large kettle in hand. In the dojo, past the open sliding door, were the mere fifteen supporters of the temple taking a break.
"Thank you very much for today."
Seishin entered the dojo and nodded his head as Miwako knelt to say their thanks.
"You are truly appreciated. Everyone, please enjoy a short rest."
As Miwako spoke, the people surrounding the low table bowed their heads. They interrupted their pleasant chat to say thank you, still wiping their necks with towels, others still wearing their aprons. Many performed their memorial services in their own homes but there were parishioners who had moved far away, or who had other circumstances that lead to them using the temple. At times like these, in a village with no takeout or delivery services, the duty of preparing meals between parishioners and priests fell to the temple. When it came to doing the yard work for the grounds and the building maintenance, the temple was chronically short handed.

When there were events or functions, a meeting could be had beforehand with all of the helpers to pass on duties but they couldn't do that for daily memorial services. The temple was sustained in ordinary times by unspoken attentiveness.
"The Junior Monk must be worn as well. It is hard work after the mushiokuri, isn't it!" said Yasumori Setsuko with a smile. "And thank you to you as well, Madame." she said nodding towards Miwako.
"We truly manage because of the help like this that you all provide."
"I do try not to get in the way," Setsuko said with a bright laugh.
Setsuko was member of the parishioner's committee Yasumori Tokujiro's second wife. She wasn't yet at the age at which one commonly concentrated so heavily on faith but she organized the women parishioners and regularly looked after the temple. Today was another day spent organizing the female laborers towards overseeing the temple kitchen work for the meals shared between the priests and the mourners, from setting the placements to the clean up afterwards.
"It's going to be like this until Obon, isn't it? Isn't tomorrow's schedule busy with the Buddhist memorial services too?"
"That it is," Miwako answered Setsuko with a smile.
"Then, I wonder if I might count on everyone's help again tomorrow?"
In response to Setsuko's words, about nine women gave a nod.
The elderly, in a fashion befitting the elderly, called out to Mitsuo as he went about filling their tea cups.
"Mitsuo-san, we're sure you'll be busy tomorrow, yourself."
"The cemetery's walkway is getting pretty overgrown, I think I'll be mowing," Mitsuo said with a smile floating to his face.
"Yes, indeed. Obon is close; I was thinking the cemetery needed to be mowed. We should at least make sure the walkways are kept up, yes?"
The village buried their dead, and while they didn't necessarily construct the tombs themselves, there were those within the parish who didn't have a place to bury their dead, or those who had other circumstances which lead to cremation who would still want a grave site built. For just such circumstances, the temple had a graveyard on its western slopes but while it was thought to be the community's duty to provide its upkeep in truth it was Mitsuo alone who did it, and only in his spare time.

"Then, guess tomorrow I could mow."
"Well, if you do it bit by bit, you ought to have it done by Bon."
Light laughter broke out. Setsuko bowed her head to the laughing people.
Miwako herself had come from a nearby temple, succeeding this house by arranged marriage. Being a woman of temples herself, she wasn't unfamiliar with the strain of managing a temple home. But it was a temple whose attendants only totaled around two hundred, so it wasn't even in the same league as her parent's temple, where it was barely full time work. When she'd heard it was large despite being a countryside temple, she was prepared but when she had stepped into the reality of it, it had surpassed her imagination. There was quite an age difference between herself and her husband, who had a late marriage, so Miwako had only borne one child. They were but a family of three. The cornerstone of the temple labor should be those of temple family, but that temple family itself was minimal. While the temples patrons were many, it was the country, so the alms and offerings didn't amount to much, thus there was a limit to how much help they could hire. If it weren't for the good will of the people willing to lend a hand and a smile, the temple would not be. She held a visceral gratitude.
"Come to think of it," said the old man Takemura Gohei to nobody in particular. "Yesterday, no, I guess it's today, huh? Did you hear about the truck that came through?"
"A truck?" repeated a few others.
"A moving truck. Old man Matsuo came by and mentioned it when cutting the grass."
"Oh my, for the Kanemasa house?" Setsuko said, surprised. Where the northern mountain of the temple and the western mountain met was a Takemura family mansion called Kanemasa. It was demolished and afterwards a strange house was built. It was finished during the rainy season and yet its inhabitants had yet to move in.
"I don't know, it's just. They said the yuge-shuu saw the truck. The truck came in as they were burning the Betto, and then turned back."
"Ah, their eldest son was a yuge-shuu. --But, isn't the Betto burned in the dead of the night?"
"That it is."
Seishin faintly knitted his brows. Before the break of dawn, he had

seen the lights of a car coming into the village from his window. He had thought at the time that it was not a suitable time for such a thing.
"People don't normally move in in the middle of the night, do they?"
"Are you sure they didn't take the wrong road?" Mitsuo interjected, though Setsuko did not seem satisfied with his explanation.
"Could one make such a mistake, I wonder?"
Seishin tilted his head slightly. Where the village road along the stream came to the highway there was indeed a three way fork but surely nobody would mistake the village road for the highway.
Old man Gohei nodded, too.
"But then, they didn't move in after all, so we can only assume it was a mistake. But, there were two cars behind it, so it's a pretty strange story either way," said Setsuko, earning a nod from Mitsuo.
"They haven't moved in, have they, now that you mention. Even though that building's been finished a while now. --What were those people called again?"
"Nobody knows! There's no nameplate. I mean, even the ones who built the house were from an outside company, so they must not have any connection to Sotoba at all. So, nobody knows anything about them. Though, I did hear that they were from Tokyo or somewhere around there."
Setsuko's household was often called The Contractors, working in construction. In the village most construction was taken up by the Yasumori contractors but, come to think of it, the Yasumoris had nothing to do with that home, Seishin recalled.
Setsuko looked towards Seishin, giving a troubled smile. "My, but after they've moved all this way, it would be nice if they were good people."
After looking over the people who nodded their assent, Seishin turned his eyes towards the dojo window. The summer sun shone in. Through the southwesterly window was the graveyard spread over the temple's western slope, overlooking the storage house for the sawmill at the foot of that slope. At the side of the sawmill's storehouse was a concrete building that served as the village's one and only hospital, the Ozaki Clinic, and on the mountain slope beyond that was the Kanemasa mansion. Between here and there were the fir trees blocking off that building from sight. Above the tree tops he could just barely see a black slate roof and part of the gables peeking up.

The Takemura house popularly called Kanemasa was formerly the estate of the village headman, built there in order to look down on the village as the founding family they were. The headman took the opportunity to transfer into the neighboring town of Mizobe's administration, moving into the town's territory itself but it wasn't as if all ties to Sotoba were cut. Two generations of the family had inherited the duties of the town headsman, and they held considerable influence in the parliament; furthermore, with their strong ties to Sotoba, Kanemasa even now held considerable weight as Sotoba's mouthpiece, carrying on as leader of the village. That is, until that Kanemasa family head passed on last year in July, with the Kanemasa mansion being demolished in August. It seemed the late predecessor sold the land before he died. Afterwards an odd house was built.

There was nobody who knew what kind of people its masters were. Kanemasa was still considered a supporting family of the temple so Seishin had known the heir for some time, but even that heir said he didn't know why the land was sold. It seemed the predecessor had arbitrarily taken it on himself to make the sale in secret. As for why he would do such a thing, nobody could make sense of it. Releasing the estates was tantamount to severing ties with Sotoba. For the Kanemasas who had set up a stronghold in Sotoba, it was too senseless, and even the heir was at his wits end try to make sense of it.

Why did the new owners move out into the country side was one question, another was what kind of people were they and under what circumstances did they purchase the plot of land, and another still was what was the Kanemasa predecessor thinking when selling the land off, the house and the territory around it. There were so many unanswered questions.

Then there was the moving truck that came in the deep of night. In its own way, it was fitting for that house. But, whoever was going to move in, they wouldn't have been Kanemasas. Seishin continued to gaze up at the mountain.

Probably---no, certainly.

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Entry tags:

- shiki,
- shiki: hashiguchi yasuyo,
- shiki: kunehiro ritsuko,
- shiki: mutou,
- shiki: nagata kiyomi,
- shiki: ozaki takae,
- shiki: sekiguchi miki,
- shiki: shiomi yuki,
- shiki: takano fujou,
- shiki: toshio,
- shiki: towada

4

The nights, when the heat could dissipate, were short and the sun rose early to shine brightly over the mountainsides, warming them up. Kunihiro Ritsuko came down the steep slope at a quick pace. The northern part of the village was nothing but slopes from the northern mountain. A number of kids were behind Ritsuko, and with no mind for the slope, they would go up and down them, passing Ritsuko by.

"Miss! Good morning!"

Ritsuko returned a "Good morning!" to them. The kids made it to the top of the hill, crossing over the slope towards yet another slope that lead to the lumber mill. They were probably going to do radio exercises.

With a light smile Ritsuko passed the street corner to the white building ahead. The one with the Ozaki Hospital signboard was Ritsuko's workplace.

From the mountains that pressed in on the village, the breeze blew

through like a lingering shade, carrying the smell of the fir trees with the voices of the cicadas. Their cries made the early summer morning somehow melancholy. Turning her eyes to the eastern mountains, the freshly risen sun's rays were strong, and she imagined it would be another hot day today.
Taking a shortcut across the parking lot, Ritsuko went around the back of the hospital. She came in through the staff entrance, straight towards the locker room.
"Good morning," she called out politely as she opened the door, though there was nobody in the locker room. No other nurses must have arrived yet, as the window blinds were left closed, the air in the room stagnant with the lingering laziness of the weekend.
The Ozaki Hospital did have "hospital" on the signboard but for all practical purposes, they didn't take in-patients. If it was for observation or examinations, a special case might be taken in for a night or two, but any patients who required a longer stay than that were all sent to the hospital in Mizobe. Thus if there was no night shift, there was no Sunday shift, and her fellow nurses would rotate shifts in order to have two days off per week. As the village's only hospital there were emergency cases that would be taken on a Sunday but the hospital director who had inherited the position was understanding and had staff on call in three week cycles, as it wasn't like they really needed to come in to work, and there was compensation for being on call. --All in all, she found it a bountiful place to work at.
She choose the job because she liked it after all, and it felt worth doing. It wasn't a bad place to work. And yet, on the morning after a day off, there was that listlessness, thinking 'here we go, another week.'
Throwing her bag into the locker, Ritsuko took out her freshly selected white coat. She changed into her white uniform, tied her hair up and put on her white nurse's cap. Funny how with just those preparations, it felt as if her posture improved.
It was going from her personal self to herself as a nurse. There was a strange divide between the two. The listlessness after a day off might have just been annoyance at crossing that distance between the two selves that grew the longer a break was.
She checked herself out in the mirror and gave herself an: "All right!" She raised the blinds and opened the window, a cool breeze and the voices of the cicadas blowing in. And, of course, the lively

voices of children.
Behind the hospital stretched a narrow rice field and the Maruyasu lumberyard. That was the spot decided on for the neighborhood's radio exercises. The cheerful shouts of the kids gathered there echoed through the mountains near the lumberyard, flowing more loudly into the room than even the voices of the cicadas.
The nearby mountains were bountifully green. High on the mountain to the right, the main temple building could be seen. Shone on directly by the sun's rays, the large roof glistened like dull silver. From the temple grounds to the sawmill, the slope was sparse with trees that jutted out like teeth. That was the temple's graveyard. As Sotoba didn't really use tombstones, you wouldn't know it was one just by looking.
There the mountains had horseshoe hollow, holding who-knew-how-many lumberyards. Clean cut wavelets of the planted fir trees treetops basked in the morning sun. The mountains to the left were green with firs, too. From above that a pointed black roof top peeked out.
Ritsuko ended up looking up looking up at that house--that mansion.
Until recently, that was the Kanemasa mansion. It was a stately mansion indeed, with its old stone walls, its countless ridged roofs, and garden trees. And furthermore, the masters had long ago--before Ritsuko had even come capable of awareness---changed residencies, so the mansion was often unmanned, and while there was at least upkeep, it wasn't what you would call stellar, so amongst the children it was known as "The Kanemasa Haunted Mansion."
Ritsuko, during a middle school under the guise of some test of courage game, had snuck into the garden. She remembered expecting it to be unmanned only for an old man she supposed was the property manager to find her and scold her.
That haunted mansion was torn down last year. Afterwards a strange house was erected. It was called strange but it wasn't exactly the building itself that was strange. Yes, if it weren't in Sotoba, if it was a holiday home, that is, in some small village in another country, there wouldn't have been anything out of place about it. It was small, but it was like something you'd see in a movie--an occidental house.
That building, when compared to the village that was its backdrop,

clearly stood out. Another thing that made it weird was its bearings. That house seemed to think it was there for a hundred years or more. It had an old stone wall, and the chimneys and windows looked as if they'd weathered the winds and the rains. It appeared they dismantled and rebuilt an older building.
The villagers were bewildered as to why someone would do that. They demolished an old house and built a new one, regardless of whether it blended in well with its scenery, overlooking a small village unlike any other that one could find anywhere else, giving off a feeling of greater age and history than any other home in the village. No matter how it seemed to be aged into place, there was an unshakably out of place feel to it.
(It really is a strange house...)
As she murmured that in her thoughts, the locker room door opened.
"Oh my, it's Ricchan!"
It was Nurse Nagata Kiyomi.
"Good morning."
"It sure is early," said Kiyomi with a smile, opening her locker.
"What's wrong? You look pensive."
Ritsuko shook her head. "Just thinking that the weather is nice. It looks like it's going to be hot."
"You said it," said Kiyomi with both a sigh and a smile, stripping off her clothes candidly. Ritsuko hurried and stretched a hand to lower the blinds.
"Oh, it's fine. We'll get a breeze if the blinds are open. It might be different for a girl like Ricchan, but there's not going to be anyone peeking in to see this old girl in her underwear."
"Wouldn't you say lady instead of old girl? About a woman at forty." Kiyomi laughed as she put on her white coat.
"That's old fashioned. ---I've long passed forty. The only one who'd call me young and be happy to come see me would be the dead from the temple's yard."
Ritsuko looked at the graveyard on the slope with a laugh.
"What's this, age talk?" said Hashiguchi Yasuyo, coming into the locker room.
"Good morning."
"Morning. --Well dear me. Leaving the blinds wide open like that!"
"Like I was saying," laughed Kiyomi. "I'm at the age where it wouldn't even be bad to be peeked at."

"What are you saying! You, you're still ten years younger than me!"
"Maybe if I was ten kilos lighter I'd hide."
"Some people hide for shame, but there's a matter of modesty, you know. Though if I were as young as Ricchan, I might flaunt a little."
"Matter of modesty, huh?"
"If a woman doesn't have that, it's all over for her! ---Even you and me aren't something to scoff at, for a couple of old sea lions."
Toshio stepped out of the bathroom first thing in the morning with a cigarette already in his mouth and headed to the dining room. The bright light came pouring in through the large southern window. There were two people's shares of breakfast set on the table with a newspaper in Toshio's seat. He looked at the sight and thought 'I see, Kyouko's gone back to Mizobe.'
Ozaki Toshio was thirty two and the director of Sotoba's only hospital, the Ozaki Hospital. That is to say, Toshio was the only doctor in town. Three years ago, his father died of pancreatic cancer, and so he quit his job at the university hospital to return. His wife Kyouko was thirty and they had no children. Unable to stand life in the mountain village, Kyouko stayed in her apartment near an antique shop she kept in the more urban town of Mizobe. She came back to Sotoba two or three times a month.

Toshio wasn't sure whether it was more appropriate to say she didn't come by more often than that or that she came by that frequently. That she hated life there and left may have meant that they had a cold marriage but all that aside she did come back on her own so that may have meant they had a good relationship.

"Good morning."

As he looked out the window, his mother Takae carried in miso soup. He gave a half-hearted response. Looking at the weather forecast, it would be a clear day and the probability of rain was 0 percent. The daytime temperature was to be hotter than usual for this time of year, with temperatures to surpass 36 degrees Celsius. It'd been that way this year since spring. There hadn't been much rain and it was unusually hot. In the Tokai region, there was a wide scale drought and severe damages caused by the intense heat.

Takae sat facing the table, taking in Toshio's T-shirt and jeans clad

form with a critical eye. At the elegant and extravagant evergreen table were six chairs of elaborate and refined craftsmanship, the most ornate of which was empty. It was once his father's seat, and according to Takae, that was the seat of the head of the family, and Toshio was still lacking in the dignity to so much as sit at that seat. Toshio didn't really care where he sat. He would be fine sitting in the lowest seat but his mother didn't understand that. It seemed she meant withholding the family head's chair to be a punishment.

With a 'good grief' breath, he kept his eyes outside. Through the living room window overlooking the spacious backyard one could take in the western mountains at a glance. The mountain side was a summer suited green and poking out through one section of that was a slate black roof. The structure stuck out from above the gables. It was a curious, triangular roof, like a picture a small child would draw. It wasn't a house suited for Sotoba, but if it were only surrounded by the fir trees and if that was all that were around it, it could suit itself there in its own way. If it were covered in snow in the winter, it may have been an interesting sight.

(It's a weird house...)

As he murmured that in his thoughts, Toshio caught sight of Takae, who let out a low voice. "Do you have the time to be so leisurely?"

Receiving only a halfhearted answer to that as well, Takae looked out the window for only a moment, herself. "They haven't moved in, have they? I wonder, have they no intent to live here at all?"

"It's probably not a holiday home. Not a house built up like that."

"How garish."

Toshio gave a thin smirk at the clear thorns present in Takae's words. To begin with Takae's relationship with Kanemasa was not a good one. She did not take well to being looked down upon by them. As the Kanemasas had moved out, at last the only ones looking down on the Ozaki family were those at the temple, and now those whose faces she had never even seen had come to look down on her. For Toshio, it was something he couldn't understand

being so upset over but so long as he couldn't understand that, he would never be allowed to sit at the seat for the head of the family.

"Everyone's got their circumstances. --Done with breakfast."

Mutou entered the hospital grounds and noted that the front door was already opened. Through the glass pane, he confirmed that several patients had arrived in the waiting room. Part timer Sekiguchi Miki was sweeping. With a greeting to him, Mutou turned towards the side door. As he stepped in the side door, he saw another part timer Takano Fujou was beside the spicket washing the mop. They exchanged greetings and he headed into the locker room for his white coat. He drew out the changing wall, his legs dragging, then hurried to the reception desk where Towada was scrubbing the counter.
"G'Morning."
"Good morning." Towada gave a youthful smile and wave.
"I'm already finished here, so you're welcome to go to the break room first, Mutou-san. I will handle things here!"
"Sorry for the trouble."
Towada humbly dismissed that it was no trouble and turned to greet the patients. Most of them had been getting treatment here for a while, so there were many familiar faces.
Just as he was going to take Towada up on his offer and head to the break room, the director stepped into the waiting room from his own house. Dressed in only jeans and a T-shirt.

"Yo, morning," Toshio said to nobody in particular, sliding his arm through his white coat as he surveyed the waiting room. "Oi, oi. There's already this many here? You old folks and your early rising."

One old woman replied to his idle comment. "Isn't it more that the young doctor is slow to rise? It's late, you know."

"Like that's the problem. It's because I have to meet with you all that business hours have been pushed up earlier and earlier. Hope you're all at least eating breakfast before you come in."

"I always do."

"That's good. You don't have many years left you know, so you have to eat as much good food as you can so there's no regrets."

Thin laughter filled the waiting room. Mutou and Towada exchanged forced smiles. The director, Ozaki Toshio, was like this in anything and everything he did.

"There you go again with those thoughtless, cruel words..." Sighed Mutou quietly as he followed after Toshio into the break room.

"It's the gods' honest truth. ---What's up? You're dragging your feet."

"I'm just sore. It's from the mushiokuri."

"That right? Mutou-san was a yuge-shuu?"

"Yes, I was, but that aside..." Mutou gave Toshio a withering glare. "Since you don't watch your mouth, I have to hear that the young doctor of the Ozaki Hospital is a no-good doctor, you realize."

"Is there any doubt I am a no-good doctor? If I was serious about being a doctor, do you think I'd come back to the country like this? What I left behind was a modern ivory tower."

'Good grief,' thought Mutou as he forced a smile. The former Doctor Ozaki had been an exceedingly haughty man, and there were those, particularly the elderly, who came to the hospital longing for the gravitas of his predecessor, saying that his son was an impudent brat but as for Mutou himself, he preferred the son to the father. He was verbally abusive, using it to intentionally provoke others around him, imprudent and light lipped. Wearing his white coat over jeans and a T-shirt, he didn't command so much as an ounce of majesty as a doctor but he didn't begrudge after-hours medical examinations and if he was called, then regardless of the hour he would grab his bag and go off on a house call without a second thought. Last year he'd taken out a significant loan to expand and remodel one part of the hospital and bring in a CT scanner. The destruction of the spacious director's office beloved by generations, indeed a splendid room, and the adjoining reception room that both

faced outwards to an extravagant garden, for the sake of at CR scanner, spoke volumes about Toshio's temperament.

Toshio opened the break room door. Inside, Towada saw that all staff members were already assembled. There were four nurses. First was the eldest, Hashiguchi Yasuyo, with Nagata Kiyomi and Kunihiro Ritsuko completing the list of those from within town, followed by the commuter, Shiomi Yuki. There was another worker who commuted, Isaki Satoko, but she wasn't there today. Towada supposed that since she wasn't here, it must have been her day off. There was the X-ray technician Shimoyama, the office workers Mutou and Towada, as well as the part timers in charge of cleaning and general duties, Miki and Fujou, and that was all the staff there were to take care of each and every patient in Sotoba.

"Good morning."

Seeing Toshio and Mutou, Kiyomi stood. In response Toshio indicated for her to get him a coffee and sat himself down at one of the chairs surrounding the wide table. Mutou pulled out a neighboring seat when his movements caught Kiyomi's eye as she was about to leave the room.

"Mutou-san, what happened? To your leg."

"I was just now telling the doctor how they're sore."

"Oh, Mutou-san was a yuge-shuu? Somebody doesn't get enough exercise, does he!"

"A little exercise wouldn't have warded this off."

Toshio snickered. "The festivities start off with bunch of guys jumping all over the place like mountain tengu, after all."

"Exactly."

With a grimace he finally took a seat. He had tended to it all day yesterday, but it still hurt. It seemed like he was going to be

groaning every time he stood or sat down for a while still.

At the window side table, the nurses dutifully prepared the gauze. Shimoyama opened a manual filled with sticky notes. Before the hospital opened staff was supposed to assemble for a morning meeting but it was really only a chance for staff to relay anything that needed to be known while everyone was assembled in the brief lull before medical examinations began, and nothing more.

The sun's rays and a pleasantly cool breeze came in through the wide open window. For now they could get by comfortably enough without the air conditioner but this summer was hot. As the sun rose, the temperatures were sure to rise rapidly as always.

"The weather's so good it's annoying." Toshio looked out the window, lighting a cigarette. Toshio was a member of the heavy smoker class, an archetypal example of a doctor not practicing what they preach, neglecting their own health.

"It really is!" Yasuyo stopped to look out the window. Already sweat was forming on the rounded tip of her nose. "Day after day, I can't take this heat! When you put on weight, heat becomes even hotter."

"Of course summer's gonna be hot. But still, this summer is *hot*. This weather's going to clear the old folks right on out of here."

Mutou scowled at Toshio. "I'm begging you, please do not say that kind of imprudent thing in public."

"---If I lose that many clients, at least Seishin will be raking it in."

Mutou let out a sigh; there was nothing that could be done about him. The heir of the mountain temple, Muroi Seishin had been a classmate of Toshio's.

"...Come to think of it, someone from the Yajima National Health Institute said that he had seen the doctor talking to a monk and found it strange."

As Yasuyo said that, Toshio gave a low chuckle.

"He could smell the conspiracy, I bet. When me and Seishin get together, you never know what we might be plotting."

"Please don't say that. When you say it, it doesn't sound enough like a joke."

While the fir trees isolated the mountainside and the houses in a sense, they were at the top of the map near the Maruyasu sawmill's lumber yard and the doctor and the monk had been friends since they were children. It was common knowledge amongst the villagers but it might have looked like and unusual combination to someone who didn't know.

"That's right, hey, back to the mushiokuri," said Mutou as he rubbed at his leg. "Something weird happened."

"Something weird?"

"Yes. While we were burning the Betto, a moving van came by."

"Oi, oi. Isn't that in the dead of night?"

"Right, in the dead of night. There was a truck and two cars following it."

'Hnn' breathed Toshio as he exhaled smoke, looking to the window. "Whatever the case, they seem to be pretty weird. The people living at Kanemasa."

"Don't you think so? If a moving truck comes in you'd normally think that they were finally going to move in to Kanemasa, wouldn't you? The house had been built last June, but the owners themselves still hadn't ever moved in! As a matter of fact, that truck only came in half way, then turned back around!"

"Eh?" It was Yasuyo who interrupted. "Are you sure it wasn't just a careless driver who took the wrong road?"

"That can't be," said Yuki. Yuki drove in to work from a neighboring

town herself. "There's no road to mistake it for. The road's a different size! There aren't any side roads around there besides the one coming into Sotoba."

"So I'm saying, maybe they had the wrong main road and were changing course."

"If that was the case, isn't there the drive-in on the corner at the intersection? The parking lot is big enough that the truck could have easily turned around without having to come all the way into town to back up and change directions."

"Really?"

"In the first place, you wouldn't normally move in in the middle of the night, either."

"You might if you moved in from far away," Yasuyo said looking to Mutou. "What was on the license plate?"

"No idea. It wasn't close enough that you could see the license plate."

"In cases like that, wouldn't you set out to arrive during the day time? It's strange is what it is."

While Yuki was trying to push the story as strange, Yasuyo turned a frustrated eye to her.

"Then there was probably some unexpected delay that made them arrive late, I'm sure."

"But isn't that boooring?"

Mutou and the others laughed at her whining way of putting it.

"Good grief. That's all it comes down to for this girl."

"I want to be entertained, since I'm still young," said Yuki as she leaned towards Ritsuko, peering up into her eyes. "Since I don't

have anybody to eat lunch with on Sunday in Mizobe, three doors down from the town hall at the Italian restaurant."

Ritsuko's eyes widened with a start, her face quickly going red.

"Yuki-chan," Yasuyo laughed. "What a concrete topic you've turned to now!"

"It's a maiden's dream! He would wear a green polo shirt, and I would dress to match him in a mint green one piece!"

"Oh, Yuki-chan, you!"

Toshio laughed as Ritsuko gave Yuki a light push. "Yuki-chan still hasn't said who she was with, though."

"That's right, that's right!"

With a whine of 'No!' Ritsuko glared at Yuki as if angry, her face red.

Come to think of it, Ritsuko was twenty eight, wasn't she, getting to be about that age, thought Mutou. It wouldn't be strange at all for her to be getting married at that age, in fact by the village of Sotoba's standards she would be a late marriage. But it would hurt to have the good nurse quit. Even setting her quality aside, there would probably be a nurse shortage; he didn't think that they could find a replacement so easily for a country hospital.

"If you're getting married, make it to someone who'll let you continue nursing. If not, don't expect any wedding presents from me."

At Toshio's teasing, Ritsuko turned away, still bright red.

"It is not going to come to that!"

According to the Ozaki Hospital signboard, their specialty was internal medicine but by request they could look into anything. It was technically a hospital, so patients could be admitted but in all

the rooms there were 19 beds, all of which had remained open ever since Toshio had returned. Even if they had the equipment, there wasn't enough staff to manage in-patient clients.

"I'd been planning to rely on Ricchan's little sister, though. Her working at a day care was a miscalculation."

Despite being teased by Toshio, Ritsuko wore an unfazed smile.

"Don't you think she choose that instead because she sees how much I suffer for work?"

"And so, we've got no choice but to count on Mutou-san's daughter."

"Surely you jest," returned Mutou. Kids nowadays wouldn't want to work at the same place as their parents, and his eighteen year old daughter was still in high school.

"You're a cold guy. Then that leaves--" Just as Toshio was speaking, Kiyomi returned from the kitchen with a tray. "Ah ha, Nagata-san's got a daughter."

Mutou and Ritsuko laughed, leaving Kiyomi to look at them with bewilderment. "What is this? You've been badmouthing me, I see."

"Naw," Toshio laughed. "It's been unanimously decided that we will be having Nagata-san's daughter coming to work here as a nurse."

Kiyomi gave an exasperated huff. "My child is still in sixth grade. --- Here, your coffee."

Kiyomi sat a cup down in front of Toshio and Mutou.

"Excuse me, Doctor?" Towada opened the door and stuck his face in. "The old man from the Ebata family's fallen off of his bicycle."

"It starts."

Toshio stood. Yuki and Ritsuko briskly prepared the gauze.

"Is he coming in?"

"Someone from the house will be bringing him. He's cut his head and his face is covered in blood."

Toshio and Yasuyo half-hustled out, leaving the freshly brought coffee untouched. It was still ten minutes until office hours officially began.

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5

Their lunch finished, the two children flew outside. Maeda Motoko saw them off and then washed the bowls and cups they had been using before they'd left. The same children who had vowed when summer vacation had first started to bring their own dishes to the sink and wash them had begun abandoning their jobs one by one, as if becoming accustomed to the vacation from school and remembering how the wild and free time was meant to be used. They would probably, no, certainly, be leaving their dishes on top of the table and running out to play until after the Bon festival.

--That's just how children are.

Motoko bore a smile as she cleaned. Motoko herself had been made to promise their teacher that they would all clean up around the house together over the break but little by little things returned to this natural state as they approached the new semester.

Even if there were vacations from school, the adult world didn't have such vacations. Her husband was away at work at the JA, the Japan Agricultural Cooperative, and her in-laws had gone off into the mountains. In order to allow her step parents to use them if they returned, she straightened up the utensils and snack box. Setting the cloth over it, she set out of the house.

Motoko's home was in the southern tip of the village. The southern part of the village was nothing but farm fields. The village that opened up from the north like a spreading paper fan collided with the southern mountain ridges that closed it off. That southern spur's tip defined the boundaries of the unobstructed water planes. Those paddy fields were a plane of subdued green. It seemed that out beyond the village was a water shortage that was causing severe

damages but for the time being that didn't seem to be in effect in the village. The foot paths between the fields were like a gutter, due to the spreading rice plants. The firs that covered the mountains were a deeper green than ever, shone on by the sun's bright rays that emphasized their hue, the color of summer itself.

A transformer was erected directly on the edge of the southern mountain spur. The power cables that stretched off of that from the mountain ridges out towards the other mountains formed a relay between the ridges, winding from the southern spurs to the westerly ones. The tower glistened like silver against the backdrop of the cloudless summer sky.

Motoko squinted her eyes and crossed the path in front of her house. The thin asphalt road was surrounded by an irregular dotting of houses, overall nothing to cast a sufficient shadow over it, making the surface of the road shimmer with a haze of hot air like heating burning metal. To escape that heat she stepped down from the road into the paths between the rice fields, where the tips of the rice plants tickled at her feet, walking between fields until coming out at the highway. The national highway that ran north from the south of the village meandered greatly between two mountain ridges on the south and the east. Walking along that curve, soon up ahead a short bridge appeared. On the guardrail of the bridge was engraved "Sotoba Bridge" but there probably weren't many who would remember that name. The name didn't mean anything to those outside the village, and to the villagers it was known as the "highway bridge." ---There were plenty of accidents near that "highway bridge"

The plain between the two ridges was broad and allowed for a clear view of the curve. That must have invited negligence on the part of drivers, leading them to speed up in excess, which was bound to lead to an accident. Especially in the south--cars coming from Mizobe heading north, due to the clear outlook, seemed to misjudge how many ares the curve was. An are was by far less than what it appeared. With that misunderstanding, the car would speed up and fail to take the turn, plowing on head. That was bound to happen near the national highway bridge. The cars that had plowed through crashed into the guardrail, and every year the aftermath of

that would again lead to bridgework repairs.

That wasn't all, traffic accidents involving people were frequent there too.

Just before the bridge the highway intersected with a road that lead into the village. While the stoplights turned off in the night, there were stop lights about in the daytime, and pedestrian crosswalk lights were also established, yet there were no end to the count of children and elderly hit by cars as they tried to cross the road.

The cars driven by villagers were fine. The villagers knew about the stoplights and of course about the twisting farm roads near there, and they knew the nature of that curve. People from other places easily overlooked Sotoba's stoplight, and furthermore the villagers--such as Motoko herself just now was doing--would rise up from the paths between rice fields onto the highway to cross. In shock at seeing a person suddenly appear there, drivers would hastily slam on the breaks but it was a place where speeding accidents were frequent, there were times when they didn't make it in time, and the odds of any accident that did happen being severe were high. Because these assailants were overall and without fail people from other places passing through the village, Motoko's image of them was an irredeemable one defined as "outsiders: those who come to take away our children by vehicular manslaughter."

One day, somebody she'd never known or seen from somewhere else would hurt and kill her children, snatching them away. --- Motoko was unable to let go of that uneasiness, especially when she looked at the bridge, that thought would instantly rise to the surface, putting her in an unbearable mood. Her childhood friend Kanami said, with concern, that Motoko seemed to have a touch of neurosis.

(But I simply just can't let go of it...)

Motoko eyed the bridge with unease, seeing a car off on the highway that was speeding. She let out a breath and walked along the highway towards the Drive-in before the stop light. In the wide parking lot of Chigusa there was wasn't so much as a shadow of a

car.

As she called out and opened the door, Yano Kanami waved a hand at her. At the cool air of the AC, Motoko took a breath of a rest. Three people, neighbor housewives and one's child, were seated at the counter. Motoko turned and gave them a smile.

"Two minutes late," said Kanami with a smile. Motoko said that she was sorry while taking her apron out from the counter. Kanami lightly poked Motoko in the head. "You were spaced out looking at the highway. For the two late minutes."

Motoko admitted to it as she looked out the window. The shop was on a plot of land shaped like an L and from the counter the view out the window overlooked the highway that lead towards Mizobe.

"Don't worry about it so much. Your kids, Shiori-chan and Shigeki-kun, are obedient ones. They won't go by the highway. It's going to be fine!"

Motoko nodded with a sound of agreement. If she said it to herself, she only made herself worry more but mysteriously when it was Kanami who would say it to her then her unease would vanish for the time being.

Motoko's childhood friend married into the city but five years ago she divorced and returned to the village. Rice fields were plowed over in order to open a drive-in for the truckers that came in and out of the village but two years ago the expressway had opened. When the shop opened, they counted on long haul truckers and opened early in the morning when they would be heading out but that all stopped two years ago. Since then, those who lived in the village continued to provide some degree of business. Thanks to the men who came to drink at night, they were just barely able to stay in business.

Motoko looked to the white board at the corner of the counter. Today's special menu was out. This morning before opening, Kanami prepared lunch portions. Making preparations for the evening meals was Motoko's job. For that she received wages akin

to pocket money. Motoko herself was more focused on being with her childhood friend than earning an income so she would have been fine not receiving any pay but Kanami stubbornly insisted on treating her like a worker.

"By the way---have you heard?"

Suddenly asked that, Motoko blinked. "Have I heard what?"

"On the day of the mushiokuri, they say a moving truck came in. Last night, someone was saying that."

Last night must have meant either those who came for dinner, or otherwise those who came to drink after them.

"At the Kanemasa residence? Have they moved in?"

"Who knows? I just happened to overhear it."

As Kanami said that, Shimizu Hiroko who had been reading a magazine at the counter looked up. "I heard it too, that rumor. The one about the truck that came in when the Betto was being lit. But, they say it turned back around. They took the wrong road, I guess?"

"What?" murmured Motoko "If they turned back, then it wasn't Kanemasa. ---They still haven't move in yet have they? Into that house."

"That's right," said Hiroko as she closed her magazine. "I suppose they built it as a holiday home, I mean, they wouldn't choose to live out here of all places, more than likely."

"A holiday home that splendid? And one they went through the trouble of dismantling and reassembling?"

"There could be people like that."

"Impossible," said Tanaka Sachiko. "Who would go that far for a holiday home? In the first place, if they were building a holiday home, it would be in a more fitting place for a holiday. Somewhere where it's cool in the summer or where it's warm in the winter, a resort spot."

"Do you think it's one of those things?" mused Hiroko as she turned to face her. "A western style boarding house?"

"Oh, I doubt it."

"But there are stories like that. I mean, last year around this time--or was it further back still? Somebody had come to do an examination or an inspection for a resort facility, or something."

"Ah," Motoko nodded as she listened to the conversation. There was something like that. That was just a little before the summer, wasn't it? Taking the bypass you could get off at the Mizobe exit, that must have been why. By taking the expressway, even the outskirts of any large city were three hours away.

Sitting beside Sachiko and obediently sipping her soda, Tanaka Kaori looked at her mother. She was in her third year of middle school, which would be ninth grade, wasn't she? She was a relatively unrefined, dim young girl.

"Can they make a resort?"

"There's no way they can!" said Sachiko with a grimace. "Out here in the country. It was obviously all talk. What, did you want them to be able to?"

"Uh-uh. ...I was just wondering if it was true or not."

"Kaori-chan is a girl at that age, I bet she is thinking it'd be nice if the village opened up some." Hiroko insisted, causing Kaori to shake her head slightly.

"...Not really. I wouldn't know unless they tried but, I mean, if a bunch of strangers came in, it'd get noisy and..."

"Really? But if it came to that, you wouldn't have to get on a bus just to go out if you felt like shopping? They'd also increase the number of buses, so you wouldn't have to be kept waiting so long," said Hiroko with a sigh. "But however you think about it, it's pointless talk. In the first place, the old folks would never agree to it."

Motoko gave a single nod to this, too. There had been talks about an interchange exit for Sotoba too. There had been pointless proposals drawn up and the predecessor of Kanemasa had said that it was for Sotoba's own good, making very forceful motions to enact it. The ones who said no to it were none other than Sotoba itself. Motoko's father-in-law had been burning hot with outrage. We don't need something like that, that would only invite harm into the village and nothing more, the elderly had gathered and stated in conferences with Kanemasa countless times. Whether that did the trick or whether it was related to some other factor, at any rate the interchange was relocated to the more appropriate outskirts of Mizobe and since then the town of Mizobe had been developing rapidly.

"As convenient as you may say it is, weird people would be coming in too you know. I for one will pass on bowing to those outsiders, feeding off of whatever money they may drop."

Hearing Sachiko's words, Hiroko rested her chin in her hands. "So say we don't think of it as a boarding house. But if we call it a holiday home, it's a wastefully huge building, I wonder if they just didn't want to live here? It's a Western style house. It's the first I've ever seen one up close."

As if seeking agreement, Hiroko looked to Motoko. Motoko gave a bewildered nod.

"Really. I wonder if it's been a family home for generations? I wonder if the ones moving in aren't an old couple. I think they didn't want to part with the house they'd become accustomed to living in."

Hiroko laughed as if to poke fun at her. "Then don't you think they could just not move?"

"I'm saying, as they get older, maybe they wanted to live out in the fresh air of the country? Going through the trouble of dismantling the home and rebuilding it can only be out of a deep love of their home, I think."

"Or they just wanted to show off their house, you know?" Hiroko

laughed a very playful laugh. "They might have wanted to emphasize that they're a little different from country folk."

Sachiko laughed lightly beside her. "It's hardly a house worth flaunting. It's just an old western house, and if we're talking about ages, then we could give them a good match. For the same amount of money, they could have built a whole new one, after all!"

"Well, compared to us commoners, it is clear they're living in another dimension," said Hiroko with a sigh. "In the first place, we can't even afford to reconstruct one kitchen. It's so inconvenient I'm getting bitter."

"Hiroko's home is still better than ours. It was built when you were married, wasn't it? Our kitchen's been the same since my grandmother's generation."

While listening to Sachiko and Hiroko's conversation, Motoko washed the vegetables for the day's special. There was a heavy feeling settling into her chest, brought on by the image of outsiders coming into the village that rose back up.

(Outsiders... they're coming.)

In Motoko the image of "outsiders" and the image of "those who take away my children" were too entangled to separate.

"Oh my," said Sachiko. Motoko looked up towards the highway and saw one of those outsiders. She could feel something caught in her throat. Without knowing what weighed on Motoko's heart, Sachiko's voice was rudely loud. "Isn't that the workshop's boy, there?"

"Hey, Natsuno!"

It was Mutou Tohru, lightly honking his horn. He rolled down the car window and called out to the figure in a school uniform walking down the highway. Natsuno turned and upon realizing it was Tohru stopped walking, his face contorted into an overstated grimace.

"Where're you going in that school uniform?"

"Students have this thing called school they do. --And I told you not to call me by my first name."

Tohru laughed and told him to get in, motioning to the passenger seat. Natsuno wiped at his face with his shirt sleeve and got into the car.

"S'hot..."

"Why are you even out walking in this heat?"

"I got tired of waiting for the bus."

Tohru laughed at that dejected answer as the car took off again. While it wouldn't be unexpected for the middle school and grade school to be shut down in this village either, the high school students had to take a bus to the neighboring town. Not many of those buses ran in the middle of the day so if your timing was bad, you'd be waiting over an hour. While waiting, he discarded everything he was carrying and decided to walk to the next bus station. Sometimes he would actually meet the bus at the next station but most of the time the bus would pass him between stations and in the end he would be walking for three hours to get back to the village. ---Until two years ago, Tohru had the same thing happen to him a lot too.

"Knew I should've taken my bike. --Come to think of it, Tohru-chan, why are you cruising around here? Don't you have work?"

"Today's a training day. Once the training's over, we can go on home. You lucked out."

"Must be nice to still get paid the same."

"If you're jealous, than hurry up and graduate. Once you get your license you won't have to walk anymore either."

"No matter how much I hurry the year isn't going to. In the first place, once I graduate, you think I plan to set foot here again?" Natsuno said as he wiped his face with his sleeve again. "There's not even a train. How the hell does anyone live here?"

Tohru forced a smile. Natsuno was one of the few move-ins. His parents were eccentric, moving out into the country the year before on a whim. There were the occasional people who would move in from nearby but there wasn't anybody who came from the city. Even the people who moved in from the surrounding towns were sure to have blood ties to the village. Actually, Tohru himself was a move-in but he moved in when he was still a child. The Mutou household didn't have any blood ties to the village either but his father already worked at the village clinic so it wasn't as if they had no connection at all. Still, it seemed pretty rare. It'd be fair to say the only people eccentric enough to come to the village with no ties would be Natsuno's parents.

"You'll make your parents cry with talk like that. They're the type who wanted to finally move out into the country and be surrounded by nature in a mountain village, doing the old-timey, heart-to-heart neighbor thing and all," Tohru said as Natsuno made a face.

Natsuno's parents moved from the city looking for nature. They bought an empty house, prepared a lot and set up a workshop in the village from where they sent out furniture crafted from the fir trees. The Mutou family did indeed move in from outside of town themselves but as Tohru was raised in this village, he had a stronger sense for it. It could be inconvenient at times but he wasn't particularly unhappy with it. That said, there wasn't anything he was particularly happy with either. It was what it was. Thus he tried to understand why someone would move in suddenly.

If it was for nature, then while there were mountains and rivers, those mountains themselves were covered in man-made forests of those fir trees. He wasn't sure where the lines could be drawn at calling it nature, and if someone called it out as just a backwater town that was behind the times, he wouldn't know how to counter. With that in mind he could see where Natsuno could be so unhappy here. Natsuno was born and raised in the city, and it seemed he couldn't stand how inconvenient life here could be. It seemed only natural when he grumbled "My parents' whim is a royal pain. Wish I'd just graduate already."

As Natsuno grumbled, Tohru made a turn at the stop light towards Sotoba. A small ways down the village road by the

riverbed, there was a stationary shop just across from the grade school, where a gathering of old folks came into sight.

"They're always loitering around there."

Tohru smiled at Natsuno's words. The Takemura Stationary shop was primarily a business for children. Aside from for the children who came in on their way home from school, the customers from around the neighborhood were as rare as a cuckoo's cries. The shop had folding chairs out front, so it eventually became a place where one could usually see the elderly gathered around.

"All day every day, they sit around just sharing boring gossip. --- Ah, they were looking at us."

Tohru looked in the car mirror to see one of the old people up out of his chair as if he had been looking into the car. Natsuno sighed. "Standing to 'see us off.' They were definitely checking to see who was riding with you, just now."

"No way."

"That's definitely what it was. Every time I pass by them they staaare at me. It's like they're keeping an eye on the outsider."

Tohru forced a smile. "They're just curious. They don't have anything else to do or enjoy."

"If they're bored can't they play gate ball or something?"

Having a feeling that would probably be a better use of their time, Tohru's smile dropped. The truth was simply that new move-ins were unusual, so the people of the village were unusually interested. Those stared weren't out of any ill will but it was sure to be unbearably depressing for the one who was the subject of those stares.

He drove down the riverbed road as he thought as much. After driving some distance, two figures, young boys in school uniforms, leisurely walking along came into view and Tohru honked his horn.

"Ooi, Tamotsu."

It was Tohru's brother. Standing beside him was Tamotsu's classmate, Murasako Masao.

Tamotsu turned with a surprised face. "We lucked out. Hey, Masao, let's hitch a ride."

Tamotsu turned and called to him, but Masao took one look at the passenger seat of the stopped car and shook his head.

"No thanks."

"Why? It's cooler in the car."

"I said no thanks. I'm walking home. If you want to ride, you go ahead and do that, Tamotsu."

At such a blunt refusal, Tamotsu looked back and forth between Masao and Tohru, giving a forced smile and a wave for them to go on. He would be fine walking with Masao. Tohru didn't pressure them, giving a wave and driving on.

"They're a rare breed."

Tohru had no response to Natsuno's annoyed voice. Masao was the third son of the Murasako rice shop. There was something he didn't like about Natsuno, some kind of prejudice he harbored against him. It might have fundamentally been uneasiness about him having come in from the city.

In a small town there was a small community but if you tried to live there, you would know there were all types. He didn't think it was a different world, like Natsuno's dad had said. It was just a village like anywhere else. While thinking as much, they drove along the road that followed the mountain stream, turning west at the bridge. Once out of the area where the houses were crowded in, past the green fields, in the western mountains was a peculiar sight: a strange house that didn't suit the village in the slightest.

"Come to think of it, I wonder how long they're going to wait to move in? In that house."

Natsuno gave a disinterested gaze to the western mountains.

"Who knows."

There was no doubt that once the new transfers came in, interest in Natsuno's household would thin out. That was how market competition worked, the market value was decided on the whims of the gossipers themselves.

"I wonder if they're ecologists like Natsuno's parents."

"Like my parents are anything as great as all that. --And stop calling me by my first name."

Tohru forced a smile. It seemed like he really hated that name his dad gave him, based on some Heian noble. He said he hated it because it sounded like a girl's name and could be almost impressively persistent in his opposition to it.

"But, your house's situation's so messed up, what do you want me to do?"

The married couple retained their maiden names. So, Natsuno's parents weren't entered in the family register together. Natsuno was entered with his mother Koide Azusa in the family register but because of the way schools were he went by his father's last name of Yuuki.

"...Talking about it's a pain," Natsuno mumbled as he looked towards than estate. "Moving out to a place like this, they're bound to be a family of helpless weirdos. ---If not that, then criminals on the run."

"It was the boy from the workshop after all." Satou Oitarou turned back towards the shop, a smile overtaking his face as if he had made a momentous discovery; in turn, Takemura Tatsu fanned herself, seeming to force a smile.

"Just like I told you." The one sounding so proud of herself was Ohtsuka Yaeko. "That was the office manager's son's car."

By office manager, they meant the senior office staff at the Ozaki clinic's front office, Mutou. Mutou was not a man of their land so there was no shop name to know him by. That was why the elderly

called him 'the office manager.' In the past year, the Yuuki family (or should they be called the Koide family?) were the same, and calling them the 'workshop' shop name became the standard.

"That is what one would look like from behind is it not?" Yaeko motioned at the shape. "A white Coup, yes? With just the two doors. With those three numbers on the plate. I know them well."

"Oh my," said Hirosawa Takeko, as if to protest. "Even I could have told you that much."

"Wasn't it you who asked who it was?"

"I meant who was in the passenger's seat. Well, I don't think it appeared to be a girl, but."

"It was the Workshop's boy." Oitarou took her seat on the folding stool with a complacent smile. "I knew with one look at the shape of his head. Knew it was right."

"He had a school uniform, didn't he?"

"That means nothing on a school day. I saw Shimizu's daughter going to school in her uniform as well."

Sitting silently in the corner of the stool area was Itou Ikumi, who did not seem to find the gossip interesting. It was as if 'how childish' were written in large print on her thin face.

Tatsu forced a smile as she gave up on fanning herself, turning on the switch to the electric fan. A light breeze was stirred but given that it was only blowing around more hot air it didn't feel the least bit cooler.

Of course the breeze from the fan wouldn't reach the seats. The heat flowed in from off of the village pavement, and without the air conditioner the shop would have been boilingly hot. It may have been something only the elderly could do, leisurely gossiping in those steaming conditions without a care.

Takemura was right off of the highway, on the village road, across the street from the grade school. Beyond Takemura was

nothing more than the grade school grounds and the drive-in but as there weren't any particular side routes, most cars that came to the village would be sure to pass by Takemura. It was an ideal place to monitor who came and went from the village (it may have missed a few cars that came from the highway to the farm roads but there weren't many of those). ---However, Oitarou and company just had too much free time on their hands, it wasn't as if they gathered to survey the cars that came through.

It was sheer practicality that had Tatsu looking towards the road. She had used to come from a family of farmers but she renovated the front area of her living room where the sliding glass doors were and crafted a shelf to stand her wares on. She cleared away her entryway and opened the area, put out some chairs and opened shop. It was right after the war.

She had family outside the village but she lost her husband in the war. And so after the war she returned empty handed and started a business. They sold notebooks, paints, protractors and compasses. Children come in to buy gym shirt logos or gymnastic caps or whatever they were lacking for school. After school they would buy some of the cheap snacks, ice cream, or juices. The grade school only had six classes in total. There was one class of each grade, and there were maybe about ten a child per class so business wasn't booming but it was enough for a single old woman to make a living.

She had spent the entire post-war period seated at that watch post like place, watching the children and the village road. Other than someone from the neighborhood stopping by, there was nothing in particular to do besides watch the road, so even without intending to memorize them, she learned which cars belonged to which families. And it wasn't just cars. Those who used the highway bus stop also passed by Takemura. Many of those who came through had previously attended the grade school, so she knew their names and faces. That was how Tatsu came to know all the comings and goings of the village.

--No, not all of them.

Come nightfall, Tatsu closed the storm shutters and stayed inside. Spending the nights like that until morning, she couldn't know

about the cars that came and went before then. The moving truck that had come by in the dead of night, for example.

"....A truck, mm." Tatsu let out a sigh. She hadn't intended to say it so loudly but it caught Oitarou's attentions.

"What was that, something about a truck was it?"

"Not really," Tatsu replied. "Nothing to say a thing about. I was just thinking what that could have been about."

"What are you talking about?" asked Yaeko.

"What this, guess nobody's told Yaeko-san yet. A truck came. During the mushiokuri."

"The Kanemasa family?"

"Nope. But I saw it when I was burning the Betto," Oitarou said, proud of himself over something. "You know, my house is right after the Sannohashi bridge after all. The Betto's burnt right there on the other edge of the river bank. That's where I saw it from, that's when the cars came through. A hauling struck and two passenger cars."

"Heh?"

"It came close to the bridge then turned on back around. The truck had a pine tree mark on it. A Takasago Pine, I think it was. Takasago Moving was written there. I confirmed it with a camera, so there's no mistaking it."

Tatsu gave a secret snicker. Oitarou had a good camera, unsuited for a man his age. It was a hand-me-down from his son in the city and had a long distance magnification lens. Oitarou came around carrying his camera but in spite of that he'd never bought film or had pictures printed. Of course, he'd never shown off any pictures he'd taken either.

Ikumi who had been standing off alone spoke. "Either way, they were sure to be no good."

Oitarou leaned forward. "No good, really?"

"They were turned out by a ceremony to ward off troubles, so they must have been trouble themselves. Something like that coming here would be horrific!"

The elderly said nothing, giving a silent shake of their heads. Ikumi was younger than the elderly gathered around. She wasn't of an age to be called 'elderly' herself but she didn't fit in with the women her own age, due to being a bit eccentric.

"...But, what a strange story."

Yaeko mumbled to herself, but Tatsu found herself nodding in her heart. A truck came into the village in the middle of the night. And yet it turned back. --To Tatsu's recollection, this sort of thing had never happened before.

Change didn't happen in the village. Even if the people seemed different, it could all be summed up tidily by saying that they were simply country folk. Anything strange or sudden was still within the parameters of being sensibly believed, things that could be shrugged off by saying 'these things happen.' Never the less, a truck coming in the middle of the night surpassed that. ---No, it wasn't just the truck.

Tatsu watched the steam rise from the road's surface.

There was that Kanemasa house. It was sensible to believe that outsiders could move in but that building surpassed sense. It was one thing to move, but it was another thing entirely to have that building brought in from elsewhere. Why would anyone do such a thing? Were they that attached to their home or were they wanting to look down their noses that the villagers? Or possibly...

Was there a need for it? For that old fashioned, stone building?

Hirosawa pulled into his parking space in front of the house and got out of the car. He unloaded the sack of used books he had bought in town as his small daughter peeked out from behind the curtain and waved. The scent of grilled fish wafted from the house,

lights on at twilight.

Before entering into the house and giving his daughter a nod, Hirosawa looked to the western mountains. The color of the sky indicated the night was far off, and from that mountain range could be seen a building. Ever since seeing the truck turned back by the mushiokuri, for some reason or other, it had been on his mind. Perhaps it was because he now realized that the building was there, so that the inhabitants were not was unnatural.

It was an old fashioned house. He'd seen many houses be built but he'd never seen one dismantled before, and he was very interested in the construction, so very different from traditional Japanese methods with wood. In August of last year, they tore down the old mansion and began construction about a month ago, finishing off with the fence. The worker's temporary quarters on the property were dismantled. The materials were hauled out and the gates closed. It had been sitting since then in deserted silence, much to the interest of the villagers, that house.

Hirosawa hadn't heard a word about the inhabitants. He'd caught pieces of a rumor that they seemed to be from the outskirts of Tokyo. If you were having something built in the village, one would definitely use Yasumori Construction Company. No other information had leaked but he did know that this time the Yasumori Construction Company didn't receive the job. The trucks that had come to build the fence had the name of a major construction company on them, and a different prefecture's plates. Perhaps it wasn't a project that could be done by back water construction workers.

At a glance, it was a two storied building. A complex, jagged pattern adorned around it. There was a window in the steep roof, so there may have been an attic as well. Looking at the foundation, it probably had a spacious basement, too. The imposing stonework outer wall was detailed with a timber trim. It was ornate yet simple, and he wondered when it was built. It looked fantastically old fashioned and yet it didn't look to be that old in itself. If it were really that old of a building, it wouldn't have been so easy to dismantle and reconstruct elsewhere.

There weren't many windows and there didn't seem to be a porch or a veranda anywhere. He remembered watching its construction, so he thought that there was something like a bay window or two on the first floor. The windows were simple, with four corners, undecorated by any arch or such. There were slated shutters that closed tightly. No, they were more like a single slate than shutters, so maybe they were better called storm guards. It seemed like it would have poor lighting and ventilation but maybe the high ceilings would still keep it cool in the summer.

It was dignified and handsome, yet Hirosawa felt that it had the stiff feel of a fortress. The house was built on the side of the hill that faced the village as if to look down on them--or in other words, to keep watch on them. If that house was a fortress, it was not a fortress for Sotoba; it was a bridgehead for an outsider to watch over them. But, outsiders from where?

---From the fir tree laden mountains, it projected onto Sotoba:

(The village is surrounded by death.)

"Daaaaad." His daughter opened the door. "Dinner!"

"Where's my 'welcome home'?" Hirosawa patted her head as she drug along in his wife's shoes.

"I said it before from the window. Dad's the one who didn't even say 'I'm home.'"

"I'm home."

Hirosawa gave his daughter's back a light push, stepping onto the porch. Before stepping into the entryway he gave one more look to the house thrusting up into the mountainside.

(.... Fir trees are death.)

Was that a metaphor that the author from the temple would have used?

sinnesspiel

Chapter Two

1

Drawing arcs in the darkness, as if drifting, they travelled the land. A beckoning, invoked by the dead who rose from the grave, he who dispatched the will-o'-the-wisps.
The dead did not come after him. He but waited for him wherever he may go. Standing on the frozen land, vacant eyes open, he watched over him from his side as he struggled along that earth. With an ashen white face having lost its vitality, he was clad in yet more white burial clothes. In the glow of the will-o'-the-wisps they were a melancholy blue.
He dragged his feet as if to stall for time, daring to slowly approach forward towards it.
Even when finally beside him, the little brother said nothing. He was simply there with neither an outcry nor a word of malediction, and naturally without breathing a single sigh. Of course neither did he raise a hand to strike him, and he cast no stones.
He only waited to receive him. He looked as he did when alive, but with the pallor of death over him. His literally lifeless eyes had no light in them, a color well suiting the caverns they were, drawing him in closer. His powerless body was stationed there covered in burial garbs, coated in the mud of his grave.

Seishin's pencil ceased as he briefly sunk into his thoughts.

Even if the little brother had no plans of revenge, the older brother himself must have naturally believed that revenge was the

reason he appeared.

Without a doubt his little brother had come to pull him into the same purgatory as himself.

When he'd first seen and became convinced of his little brother's rise from the grave, he must have been wild with fear and fled his little brother. ---He probably did.

But, he couldn't run from the Shiki. Wherever he ran away to, his little brother was there awaiting him. After repeating that cycle, he came to at last realize he couldn't escape. Thus when he took in the sight of his little brother, he'd obediently walk on towards him but (he willingly continued to walk towards his brother but), he was always in fear that it would be this time that his little brother would inflict the wounds of vengeance on him at last.

(Revenge.....)

Seishin pondered as he looked over the paper. What was the 'revenge' he was imagining? Was he expecting the haunting to death that was so common in Japanese ghost stories? Or maybe something more straight forward, doing as he had, taking up a weapon and attacking him. Or maybe he was still deciding on his means of revenge, with this land as the stage.

For a time Seishin gazed at his writing, thinking that he wanted revenge to take on a fitting form. Something abstract--something vague. He searched through his memories of all times and places but he couldn't call to mind anything of that nature. As he searched

his memory, he thought about whether he had any reference materials of that nature but that search again came up empty.

Seishin breathed a soft sigh, looking up at the office blackboard. He withdrew his consciousness from the manuscript (from the frozen wasteland), suddenly aware of the afternoon sunlight filling the office, the artificial chill of the air conditioner, and noticing the sounds of the cicadas beyond the window.

July 27th. Wednesday afternoon, there were two appointments for the day, but they were to be handled by Tsurumi and Ikebe. Seishin gathered his writing paper and returned it to the drawer. Turning the paper face down he placed a paperweight over it, closed the drawer and stood. Just as he was stepping out of the office, Miwako came by carrying a large kettle.

"Oh, are you heading out?"

"I am going to the library for a bit. --Mother, would you like me to bring you anything?" Seishin asked, Miwako giving a smile.

"I will pass. Have a safe trip."

With a nod, Seishin turned towards the entryway. Stepping out

past the dirt floor, the midsummer rays were dazzlingly bright on the compound. The voice of the cicadas descended on him. The shrubbery were a lively green, and the foot path's stone paving from the mountain gates to the main temple, to the temple office driveway, and continuing to the head priest's quarters' entryway, was baked white. They must have known he was going out; an uncounted number of the old folks about had given polite bows and salutations.

"Oh my, Junior Monk." The voice came from a corner of the greenery. The old woman by the Japanese box tree at the entryway bowed her straw-hat wearing head to him. "Are you going out?"

It'd been a while since he'd seen that face. Did she take the trouble of coming because it was just before Bon? Seishin returned her greeting. "It's been some time. Thank you for coming when it is so hot."

"It's nothing. This year is the thirteenth anniversary of Ojii-chan's death, so I'll be counting on you again."

"Yes. Likewise."

"How is the Head Monk's health?"

A year and a half ago, his father Shinmei had suffered a stroke. Since then he had been living confined to the bed.

"Well, thank you for asking. He's been able to talk quite a bit recently."

"That's right fine to hear," said the old lady wiping her face with the towel around her neck. "That's right; just lately, I saw something wrote by you, Junior Monk, in some kind of magazine. It was an essay wasn't it? It was a short one, came across it in the hospital's waiting room."

"Ah," said Seishin with a bitter smile. The director of the Ozaki Hospital knew that Seishin would hate it, so he went through the trouble of buying the magazine that had the article in it and sat it in his waiting room. Seishin offered no comment, replying only with: "Is that right."

"Oh my, and now I've kept you! Do take care," said the old woman bowing her head deeply. He returned her bow and went from the driveway entrance to into the garage where he got in the car. The library wasn't so far one would need to drive, rather it was the perfect distance for a walk, for a change of pace, but right then the sun's rays were raining down incessantly. Furthermore if he went through the village in mid-day on foot, he would be caught at each parishioner's house one by one and would never get anywhere. As he was in a mood to hurry, he used the car.

While driving he rolled down the windows and turned on the air conditioning to chase the hot air out. The elderly saw him off. He may have had a side job in writing literature but Seishin's profession was that of a monk. They were the village's chief temple and ever since his father had fallen ill, Seishin bore the weight of the temple's families.

Receiving the formal salutations from the elderly, he slowly passed through the grounds towards the belfry before getting onto the private road. The stone stairway path down from the mountain gate wasn't long but that of course was not possible for a car to traverse. Thus a private road was established by the belfry. Following it, the road came out at the lumber yard adjoined to the Maruyasu sawmill. The private road's concrete was baked white and the voices of the cicadas forming an umbrella over the path were dry. It was a quintessential seething summer scene.

There was unusually little rainfall this year and the heat was atrocious. The car drove towards the east, onto the village road that followed the river, where the water level was low and the riverbed's dry planes had grown as a result. The rainy season dawned as it was without a proper rain. The town of Mizobe had appropriately river-like rivers but this mountain stream was fed only by the Omi River. With a water shortage downstream, Sotoba drew out water from the river. There was damage from the heat. It had been a harsh summer.

Following the stream south, he went past the vicinity of the first bridge that went towards the shrine. On the other bank of the river was the grove of the village shrine so green it practically stung the

eyes. Going further down the village to second bridge, to the urban heart of Sotoba, was the region between the second bridge and the third bridge. The third bridge was formerly known as the boundary of Sotoba.

Sotoba was originally a village settled on temple grounds, opened by woodworkers, and until the temple territory was split up, all of Sotoba was one neighborhood hamlet. Surrounded by mountains on three sides, the gathering of six neighborhoods, with an added scattering of houses in the northern mountain territory added as another territory, the seven were generally referred to as "the village of Sotoba." In recent years it was annexed into the town of Mizobe, all lumped together into one portion of Mizobe called "Sotoba," but the villagers and those surrounding the area still called it a village, and the post office designation still read village, so the seven neighborhood names lived on.

There were just under four hundred houses, and the population was only 1,300 people making for a very small village but it still had the assets from when it had been run with a village's structure, and it was maintained if only so that it could continue to keep up appearances as a village proper. The community Seishin approached held one of such maintained facilities.

Near the second bridge's vicinity came into view the old style building beside the village road, made of wood with a tile roof. This building that resembled an old fashioned school was once the village town hall and was now the community center. Since the village was annexed into Mizobe, the town hall was now being used as a community center, and one portion became a library. One might think it obvious to write off the collection of books as the meager collection expected of a country library, but in this Sotoba

was extraordinary. The temple, the Ozakis, and the Kanemasas's predecessors had arranged for the donation of a rather large collection of books, and when the Kanemasas left the village, they had donated a large sum of books and archives that Seishin made use of. Of course, there wasn't much in the way of light reading material, so it wasn't very popular with the villagers.

He pulled the car into the community center lot, one turn after the Ohkawa liquor store, and entered the building. Inside the antiqued building was a small hall and meeting rooms for gatherings, where each association and business would hold their meetings. Through the wide open windows, the sound of playing children's voices was heard. Attached to the community center was a children's hall that housed a nursery school, another business within the community center. The costs of the hall's frequent maintenance fell upon the temple---on the Muroi, Ozaki and Kanemasa households. The households of Muroi and Ozaki, and the Kanemasa house had always continued to support the village thusly.

Paying respect to the acquaintances he passed, Seishin headed towards the old library. Sitting behind the counter that was like an old world relic was the librarian, Yuzuki.

"Well, Junior Monk, good afternoon. Are you researching something?"

"Sorry for the trouble. Please let me in."

The library's collection of books was spread across two depositories in the building. As they seemed to be the type villagers would generally have no interest in, including the old archives, they were kept in a non-self-serve section. There was a rule against entry, but none the less in Seishin's case it was overlooked.

With a nod of his white haired head, Yuzuki took the archive key out of the desk drawer. Just as he had taken it out, two children from the nursery school came rushing to the counter. Giving a broad smile, Yuzuki took the books they held out and processed them for lending. Yuzuki was a gentle man, with an introverted personality and a reputation for being loved by children. He knew what children liked and often looked after and talked to them, making him known and loved as the "nice old man at the library."

"As expected, it's busy once summer vacation starts," Yuzuki said to Seishin with a delighted smile. "If only it were always like this. Children today have so many more fun things than books."

As Yuzuki said such, he looked to compare the children's room to the open stacks reading room. "Still, it's better on the children's side. As for in here, guests are as rare as a cuckoo's cry."

There was nobody in the reading room lined with books targeted to adults. Seishin came to the library often but he hardly ever recalled seeing a villager in the reading room. It was more common to see someone who liked books taking them out, or on occasion he

may see people taking notes, usually a group of high school students, though only sometimes.

"As for yourself, Junior Monk, how is your writing going? When can we expect a new work?"

"Who knows?" Seishin prevaricated with a smile. "I'm just now finally getting started on one."

"Is that right?" said Yuzuki with a smile, inviting him into the office and towards the archives.

The distinguishing characteristic of the archives was the presence of old books, something Seishin liked. Entering the storage room and turning on the desk lamp near the door, he scoured the shelves. The books were precisely stowed according to the classification system.

If one met an unnatural death at the hands of their elder brother, and if that little brother were to take up revenge against his killer, what means would he take? The little brother by no means wished for revenge but the older brother should have been in fear that he did.

All the same, the little brother would not take revenge on him. Neither cursing nor blaming him, he only accompanied him. Since the first night, reappearing every night since, he continued that pattern.

At first he was afraid, and then he became despondent knowing his little brother had no intent to inflict harm upon him.

If his little brother had come for revenge, how much better it would be.

That was, of course, a fearful prospect in itself but,

If he would inflict injury on him thusly, if in trying to take his life away his little brother would become another killer like himself, if he would take up such actions for him, he was likely to draw a tangible sense of salvation from that.

But, his little brother did not.

The victim who would not try to inflict harm upon him made it clear there was no escape from his sin. His little brother was no killer. He was not a sinner. He was the only one who was a killer, a breaker of divine law.

(He...) Seishin thought as he turned the pages (may perhaps be in despair.)

He wanted his little brother to plot revenge and become the same

repulsive being he was, to become a killer no different from himself. But, the little brother did not live up to his expectations. He knew he had no will to fulfill them by his little brother's empty stare. Unable to bear it he would lash out at his brother. ---He was sure to do that.

He lambasted him for being cowardly, unable to even take revenge, scorned him, even condemned him. And still

his little brother neither struck him nor lambasted him. He merely stood quietly by, his hollow eyes turned towards him.

His provocations had failed. He was only more stricken by this, and dropped to his knees before his little brother.

He prostrated himself in fear upon the earth, apologizing, clinging to his burial clothes and groveling for forgiveness.

----And all the while, his little brother's hollowed eyes only gazed at that spectacle.

He stared back at his little brother, until without knowing when, he averted his eyes. His head hung in shame, in order to avoid his little brother's empty stare, and he set out, further from the hill where his little brother should have laid buried.

There was nothing left he could do. He could neither run nor chase him away, he could do nothing but monologue about forgiveness to his little brother while traveling the wasteland.

With his head hung low, and without turning to look at his little brother under any circumstances, while neither acknowledging nor denying his little brother's presence at the edge of his field of vision in which he was ever aware of him, he continued to walk.
The will-o'-the-wisps crept over the land, fluttering in the dry winds as they drew their arcs, illuminating his and the corpse's path.
Taking in the highs and lows of the land with his gaze and the soles of his feet, they walked in tacit silence. Always in the corner of his sight was his little brother's flickering form, shadowed by the faint smell of death's rot. It would not allow him the mercy of forgetting his sin and all that was associated with it, nor even the mercy of wearing it down.
And perhaps in its own way that was his little brother's means of revenge.
No, if this was not a part of his brother's revenge, it may have been another part of his curse, along with the hill that never grew further away and that splendor at its summit.
---Therefore thou art cursed, no longer one of the land, an eternal vagabond shalt thou be in the earth.

Rummaging through the books in the archive and taking down notes or just things that came to mind, by the time Seishin had left the archives, two hours had already passed. The summer sun's rays were beginning to fade to the hue of twilight.

"I'm sorry, about taking so long." Seishin called out, causing Yuzuki to turn from the children he was talking to.

No, no, he smiled, an illustrated encyclopedia of insects on hand, holding onto a paper sack the children had put a rhinoceros beetle into. They probably came to ask him what kind of bug it was.

It was a charming enough scene to bring a smile to Seishin's face as he returned the key to Yuzuki. He checked out three books. Just as he was saying his thanks, as Yuzuki told him to come by again at any time, there was a piercing, shrill noise. It was the sound of a car's breaks, then the sound of something tumbling.

Yuzuki's expression changed and he rushed to the window. Seishin followed after him, rushing, seeing the village road that was, due to a dip, at eye level with the window, and on the black car on that road. Lodged into its fender was a child's bicycle.

"Are you all right?!" Yuzuki shouted, a rare occurrence, his expression a rare one as well as he rushed out of the library. Seishin followed after him from the community center to the village road. Just as Seishin and Yuzuki came running, the driver had taken the bicycle in his arms and threw it to the side of the road.

"Is he hurt?!"

At the sound of Yuzuki's voice, three children that had been crouched at the roadside looked up. Catching sight of Yuzuki, they burst out crying. The driver didn't even bother to look to that scene, tossing the bicycle to the side of the street and moving back around the front of the car into the driver's seat. He seemed distinctly burdened by having to remove an obstacle from the car's passing.

"Hey, you!"

The one to come running out of the neighborhood liquor store was its shopkeeper, Ohkawa Tomio. Ohkawa's angry voice rang out as he rushed to the car, catching the driver's side door as he had tried to close it. A black Mercedes was a sight that had never been seen in the village. The driver was also an unknown face. He wasn't from the village. As if he didn't even realize the situation he was in, he stared forward with a glassy and emotionless expression.

"Anyway, get on out of the car."

The man gave no response to Ohkawa's demand. He appeared to be in his early fifties, and in fitting with the car he dressed as if he were influential and important, a man in good shape but never the less his eyes were muddled and lifeless. Seishin's immediate impression was that the man was dead drunk.

"You don't have half a mind to get out and check on the kid? Where the hell are you from?"

From what Seishin could see, the children weren't in critical condition. Even so, one was squatting and holding his leg, clinging to Yuzuki and wailing. Whether he was hurt or just surprised, if he could cry, then it wasn't a worst-cast scenario at least.

"What's wrong? Were you hit?" Seishin asked, and the child nodded. He was probably a lower primary school student. The bicycle thrown to the side of the road was a small child's sized one, and the back wheel was bent. As Seishin was taking in these details, there was the sound of the transmission releasing. As the car started moving, Ohkawa's angry voice raged out.

"Hey! You!"

Seishin was startled. The driver started driving with the door still open. With the door caught in his hand, Ohkawa, a man built like a giant, was being pulled along. The car kept on like that along the village road, swirving towards the river before pulling the door shut and speeding far off and away.

"Ohkawa-san, are you all right?!"

Ohkawa, who had been thrown into the roadside bushes made a face as he pulled himself up. With his rage clear in his expression he glared at the leaving car.

"Who the hell does he think he is!" Ohkawa snapped as if spitting out the words, turning to Seishin. "Junior Monk, did you see the plates?"

Seishin shook his head. It had all happened so fast that his mind hadn't gotten around to it.

"Didn't seem to be a villager, did he? Never seen a car like that. Damn it, bunch of good for nothings coming and going here lately." Ohkawa stared off in the direction the car had left, lamenting. "Anyway, we need to contact Officer Takami-san---" He suddenly said, turning as if he'd just remembered the crying children. "No, guess these kids come first. How're they?"

"It doesn't appear to be serious. But we should bring him to the hospital. I came by car, so."

Ohkawa breathed a sigh and crouched beside the children. "Now, no more crying. The Junior Monk's gonna take you to the doctor."

Agreeing with Ohkawa's words, Yuzuki comforted the children, patting them each one by one on the head.

"Damn, what a punk," Ohkawa spit out, turning to Seishin. "I'll leave the boy to you. I'll go to report to Takami-san."

Seishin nodded. The villagers must have heard about the fuss, as they started gathering.

The one who was injured was a child from Shita-Sotoba called Maeda Shigeki.

"Bruises and scrapes. He wasn't hit by the car, they're probably from falling off the bike," Toshio said looking at the X-ray. "The car itself couldn't have been going that fast could it? Doesn't look like he got any head injuries either, so he got off pretty light."

Seishin breathed a light sigh of relief. The local officer Takami who was looking at the X-ray from behind Seishin breathed a similar sigh. "That, it's good. --What a relief."

The only ones in the examination room were Toshio and Seishin, along with Takami. The family hadn't come yet. Seishin didn't know the child who had been injured. The boy himself gave his name and address, but when they called nobody was there. It was possible that they were out in the fields or the mountains. They had just contacted the neighbors to look for the family.

"Still," Toshio said with a shrug of his shoulders. "I'm not clear on what happened. You don't remember the car?"

Seishin nodded. "I don't think that it was a villager. I didn't know their face and such."

"Can you write it off that easy? You didn't know Shigeki-kun's face either."

"He isn't from one of the parish families, not that I know all of the kids of the parish either. At any rate, I think that car is a different matter. It was a black Benz."

"Ah ha," Toshio nodded.

Takami nodded as if thinking the same thing. "I see, I've never seen a Benz before. If we're talking about foreign cars in this village, only the Junior Doctor's wife's BMW comes to mind."

Toshio laughed. "Towada-kun from my office drives a Golf, and Nurse Shiomi-kun has a Mini."

"Whoops," said Takami, smacking his forehead.

"---But, well, it's true there're no Benzes around. If there was someone driving a car like that, the rumors would get around. But Takami-san, better look into it just in case."

Takami nodded. "Of course. It was a hit and run after all. And furthermore it shows ill will that they drove off dragging Boss Ohkawa by the door. But Doctor, there isn't anyone in the village who would do such a thing, either."

"Desperate times, desperate measures and all that jazz."

"But," Seishin interposed. "There was something off about the driver. I don't know how best to put it but... yes, it did seem like he was under the influence. And not as if he had been drinking alcohol but as if he had taken a drug."

Seishin recalled the driver's tired expression.

"That's, it doesn't sound like anyone from the village, does it?"

"Better not to make snap judgments like that, Takami-san. Seishin, have you ever even seen a drug addict?"

"I haven't, but he did seem to be drunk. Yet he didn't have the reddened face of someone who had been drinking. Ohkawa-san had said he didn't smell like alcohol either."

"Old man Taki said something similar," Takami said scratching his head with his ballpoint pen. "He said he had seen a car through the window at the water company. He didn't know the type of car but it was a big black one. It seems it was driving through the village weaving back and forth. Just when he'd wondered if they were drunk, there was that mess. He came rushing onto the scene, fussing that he knew there would be an accident."

"Hnn."

"If only the village had a branch office out here," Takami said with a huff. "He said it was going north, so if there were someone checking comings and going for the village, the way that car stood out, it would have been over before it started. Even though a call did come into the office, the patrol car rushing from there didn't make it in time. He's probably made his way around and escaped out of the village by now."

"Probably. And with a bruised and scratched up victim."

"That's right," Takami muttered, before seeming to realize something as he looked up from his memo pad. "Say, Junior Monk. That couldn't have been the Kanemasa house's family's car, could it?

Seishin blinked. "Kanemasa---what?"

"They're the kind of people to build up that kind of house, doesn't it seem like they'd drive a Benz too?"

"However, nobody has moved into that house yet?"

"But, hey, there was talk about a moving truck coming in during the mushiokuri."

"But we're talking about coming and moving in," Toshio interrupted. "Since then, I haven't heard anything about them moving in, and it doesn't look like anyone's moved in either does it?"

"Do you think they may have moved in in secret?"

Toshio laughed in amazement. "You think someone could get away with that in this village? Even without the layout, that house's under so much attention that if there was even a hint of someone having moved in there, the next day it'd be all over the village."

"That's true, I guess. ... Then, the people of that house may have come to see how things were or...?"

"If that's how it is, it's not impossible I guess," Toshio said looking to Seishin. "But you saw his face didn't you? Later on, when the master of the house does move in, you'll know him if you see him."

"Only if I were to meet him right away," Seishin answered. It was a sudden affair, so fast that he didn't even think to read his license plate after all, so he was sure to be a bit unreliable. He recalled that something was off with his eyes but, if asked about the other features on his face he wasn't as confident.

Toshio gave an exaggerated sigh. "All that's left is to try asking the old bags at Takemura then. You said he came on the village road, that bunch watches who comes in don't they? If we're lucky they might even remember the plates."

Seishin and Takami exchanged wry smiles. The old folks in the neighborhood all gathered around the Takemura stationary shop's shop front. It wasn't as if they were truly conducting surveillance, probably, but when it came to those coming and going from the village they were unsettlingly well informed.

While wearing that forced smile, Takami scratched at his close-cropped hair. "At any rate, I will at least ask if there were any who had seen the car. It's, if we don't handle this well the culprit may

get away."

Just as Takami was saying that with a mix between a mumble and a sigh, a shrill sound came from the direction of the waiting room. Immediately Nurse Ritsuko's face appeared in the examining room door.

"Uhm, Doctor. It's Maeda Shigeki-kun's mother."

"For now bring her into the treatment room and let her see Shigeki-kun. She should calm down once she sees him. I'll be right there."

"Yes," Ritsuko said with a nod. Hurried footsteps carried past the examining room. There was the stampeding sound of someone entering the treatment room partitioned off with a single screen, then the sound of a woman sobbing out as if an emotional dam had been broken.

While listening to that hysterical voice scream Shigeki's name, Toshio approached the treatment room. Seishin and Takami followed. There was the boy lying on the bed, the middle aged woman holding him to her breast, and another woman of the same age watching over the scene. She was one Seishin recognized. She was Yano Kanami of the Drive-in Chigusa.

Kanami was the first to notice Toshio. She gently nudged the woman who appeared to be Shigeki's mother, and that woman lifted her face. Looking at the three men in the room and comparing them, she suddenly released the child and stood.

"Is that the man who ran over Shigeki?!"

Her glare was aimed directly at Seishin, to his bewilderment. It was a ghastly sight, maybe because she came rushing at him, her face covered in so much sweat it was as if a bucket of water were dumped on her, her tangled hair sticking to her pallid face. Kanami stopped the woman rushing at him with a wordless scream, and Takami rushed up seeming flustered himself.

"Ah, no! It wasn't him, Ma'am. He's just the one who brought your son here."

"Then where's the culprit?!"

The boy who had been abandoned by the shrill voiced woman looked afraid now himself.

"Well, that is, he ran away."

"You're lying, he ran him over, didn't he!"

"Motoko." The one who called out to the screaming woman was Yano Kanami. "This isn't the one. See, he's the Junior Monk from the temple. Your family isn't part of the parish so you might not know him but I'm very familiar with him."

At those words Motoko looked up to Kanami as if a switch was flipped. Kanami wore an awkward smile. "So, you see? You can calm down."

"Then----" Motoko looked between Seishin and Kanami. "Who ran over Shigeki?"

"About that," said Takami approaching Motoko's side. "For now, let me tell you what we know. It seems like the culprit wasn't a villager."

Just as he was explaining that, Motoko's voice rung out in another wordless shriek. Looking as if she could faint any moment she turned to Toshio.

"Shigeki--is Shigeki all right?!"

"As you can see, he's just fine," Toshio answered blithely. He was clearly more interested in Motoko's state. "Just some scratches and bruises. I took an X-ray just in case, and there's nothing abnormal. Tomorrow he'll be able to go do radio exercises and run amok."

Motoko blinked slowly, then, as if her body itself were not quite right, once again broke down crying. Toshio forced a smile and turned his eyes to Ritsuko, standing stock still with bewilderment. "If you ask me which is worse off, I'd said the mom at this point. Ricchan, calm her down and explain the state of his injuries to her."

"Yes," Ritsuko nodded. Toshio motioned for Yano Kanami, beckoning her to the examination room.

"You're Kanami-san from Chigusa, aren't you?"

"That's right. Motoko was working at the shop with me at the time."

"Ah, I see. The missus of the Maeda house seems a little distracted right now so for the time being I'll explain things to you. Later you can explain things to her if she doesn't seem to understand."

"Eh---yes," she said, then giving a smile to Seishin. "Junior Monk, I'm sorry about her. Motoko has been always neurotic about her children."

Seishin shook his head saying it was nothing as Kanami bowed her head. "You transported Shigeki-kun here, didn't you? I thank you very much. With Motoko in that state, please accept my thanks in her stead."

"No, think nothing of it. Motoko-san must be very distraught."

Kanami wore a troubled smile, as if to say 'really.' "Motoko's house is near the highway. I mean, there are a lot of accidents on the highway, aren't there? So, she can be prone to brooding sometimes about her children possibly being hit by an outsider driving down the highway or something like that. I really have no excuse for her."

"Ah," mumbled Seishin. Kanami had used the word "brooding" but for Motoko that may have been more of a fearful fixation. Once she heard her child was in an accident, her mind leaped to the worst circumstances imaginable, he didn't doubt.

"That is--Motoko-san must have been deeply worried."

"They're not any injuries to worry about at all. When he was first brought in, he was a little dazed from the shock but he calmed down quickly enough to give his name, address and phone number right and all. There wasn't anything out of place on the X-rays, so beyond the bruises and scrapes you can see, there's no outstanding injuries. Anyway, the victim himself was pretty surprised, and since he is a kid, he might not calm down for two or three days but he should be back to normal soon enough."

"Then, it really isn't anything serious is it?"

"Rather than saying he was hit by a car it'd be more accurate to say his back wheel was hit and that he fell over. He's a kid so it was a mental shock, I think he might have a fever from that too but it's nothing to worry about. If it does seem worrisome, I can prescribe a stabilizer if he's brought in for treatment."

"Yes," Kanami said with a relieved smile. "I'm relieved. I think Motoko will be relieved too."

"By the way," Takami interrupted. "Your place is right at the village entrance isn't it?"

"It is. It is but, what about it?"

"Well, you see, it's about the black Benz that threw Shigeki-kun off his bike, I was wondering if maybe you'd seen anything or..."

Kanami blinked. "A black... Benz, was it?"

"Yes."

"I saw it. Then, that's the car that got Shigeki-kun?"

"You did? ---Any chance you got the plates or..."

"No, I didn't. But a black foreign car going towards Mizobe did come into the parking lot."

"Towards Mizobe?" As Takami asked that, Seishin tilted his head in thought. The Drive-in Chigusa was at the intersection of the highway and the village, on the Mizobe side. If the car were going towards Mizobe and entered into the Chigusa parking lot, that would mean it had already been past the village road.

"Yes," Kanami said with a meek nod. "I heard a horn honk. And then, a black foreign car pulled into the lot from the highway bridge, grazing by a truck as it passed. Motoko had said 'what dangerous driving!' about them. That car turned around in the parking lot and went back towards the village. It was zigzagging as it drove..."

"Did you see the driver's face?"

"Yes. It was an unfamiliar face. I don't think they were from the village. I thought they must have overlooked the village road and gone past it. But he was driving so recklessly, the man driving himself seemed to be staggered or---" Kanami hesitated to speak. "Even though he was turning back, when he turned the steering wheel, his head lulled forward like this, tilting. I wondered if he was all right?" Kanami said, adding on uneasily: "It was an elegant car, even Motoko was saying that. That maybe that was someone from Kanemasa."

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With still no sign of rain the end of July approached. After seeing off the last patient on the afternoon of Saturday the 30th, Ritsuko pulled the curtain shut and turned towards the entryway, the cloudless blue sky still looming overhead. The strong rays of the sun scorched the scenery in white. The shadows that fell were tiny, but dark as if painted on.

Ritsuko's eyes narrowed against the brightness outdoors and pulled closed the curtain to dull the sun. Just then a wheezing like noise of the scooter came. The old worn out scooter pulled into the lot staggeringly, coming to a stop beneath the small shadow cast before the entryway.

Ristuko forced a smile as she took the closed curtain and half-opened it. From behind, she heard Isaki Satoko's voice.

"Ricchan, an emergency?"

Satoko had already changed clothes and had her bag in hand.

"It's the Obaa-chan of the Murasako household."

"Oh."

"It's all right. We're finished for today. You're going to eat with everyone right? Don't mind, go on ahead."

"You don't mind? I'm sorry!" Satoko said making an apologetic gesture, disappearing towards the back entrance just as the front entrance opened.

"Uhm... is now a bad time?"

The one who hobbled in with her helmet in one hand, the coating fading off of it, was Murasako Mieko of Yamairi. She was at an age where just seeing her straddle a scooter was cause for fear, but living out in Yamairi, she couldn't get by without at least driving a scooter.

"Come in." Ritsuko stood on the clay floor of the entryway, inviting Mieko inside. Bowing her head several times, Mieko passed by, opening the curtain again.

"On Saturdays, it's only until noon, I know. I'd gotten out of the house late. I'm so sorry."

"It's all right. Are you here for Gigorou-Ojii-chan's medicine?" Ritsuko asked as she moved around into the reception counter. As she was halfway there, Mutou poked his face out.

"Ricchan, it an emergency?"

"It's Mieko Obaa-chan. ---It's all right, please, go ahead and have lunch!"

Ritsuko said as much as she entered the reception area but Mutou came following after her.

"Sorry for the trouble." Mieko apologized across the counter, wiping away the sweat on her brow as if she had no excuse for herself.

Mutou smiled and lightly waved his hand. "Nah, don't mind it a bit. It's hot, isn't it?"

"It is."

"Gigorou-san's medicine, yes? --Ricchan, I'll go get the records," Mutou said. Ritsuko nodded and went deeper into the office towards the pharmacy.

"And how is Gigorou-san's health?"

"About that, these past few days it hasn't been good, so..."

"Oh?"

The northern community separated in the mountains, Yamairi, had only three inhabitants left, old folks who lived draped over the area. One of them was Ohkawa Gigorou, with a history of high blood pressure which he took medication for. Gigorou himself came for his medicine but on occasion the neighbors Murasako Hidemasa or Mieko would come.

"That's no good, is it? Wouldn't it be better to have the Junior Doctor have a look at him?"

"I'm thinking it's a summer cold is all. --Actually, my husband has one, himself."

"My, is he all right?" Interrupted Yasuyo. Carrying a cup of barley tea in hand, she placed it atop the counter. "It's hot, isn't it? Here, have this."

"Oh my, I'm so sorry, on top of coming in after hours."

"It's quite all right. No one wants to go out in the heat, we're all dawdling around the office still anyway," said Yasuyo. "How is Gigorou-san? Does he have a fever?"

Mieko waved her hand. "It doesn't look like he has a fever. If it's not a summer cold, maybe the summer heat is getting to him."

"She says Murasako-Ojii-chan has a summer cold," added Mutou, causing Mieko to wave her hand again.

"Oh, I don't think it's anything big. My husband doesn't have any kind of fever either. But, he's just sort of spaced out. He seems slack, always nodding off to sleep, though."

"Oh dear me," murmured Yasuyo. "Talk to the doctor, it might be best to have him take some medicine after all, don't you think?"

Mutou added in again "Yasuyo-san, I'm going to go put in a word

with the doctor."

"Oh, no, my, that's..."

"It's nothing, we'll just ask him quickly," Mutou said easily as he stepped out of the receptionist's office. Watching Mutou jog off towards the residential side of the building, Yasuyo offered Mieko a seat.

"It will just be a moment. --Has Gigorou-san been eating all right, with this heat? Or is he working too hard?"

"If only he were that noble a man. But no, he himself says he's just tired from going out."

"Well, that's nice isn't it? A vacation?"

"Oh, I don't think it's anything big. A few days ago, he had a guest at his home. He came in a very nice car. I don't remember what that kind of car was called, though. But as soon as I'd said what a grand car it was, he said that he had someone to meet and went out. He didn't say who he was meeting or where he was going, though."

"Heeh?."

"It sure seemed like it'd have been a story to hear though. He left in high spirits and didn't come back all night. If he was going to stay out, he could at least stay he's going to be out before he goes, though."

Yasuyo smiled. It seemed Gigorou, who lived alone, ate dinner at the Murasako house. Even if they lived in different houses, they were practically family.

"Out all night without a word to anyone. Gigorou-san, you sly dog," said Yasuyo, raising a laugh from Mieko.

"He'd be doing well for his age to come home well. But the next day, when he came back, he looked like the life was drained out of him, spacing out. If he hadn't said himself he was worn out, I'd think it was a summer cold, just like I'd been saying. I mean really, he's become so sluggish it's unbearable. Since then, he's just been

hard and fast asleep."

"Well dear me. That's worrisome."

"He doesn't have a fever. In fact, he's almost cool to the touch. His color's no good, but it doesn't seem like his blood pressure's high or anything."

"And your husband, Mieko-san, is he the same way?"

"Why he is, he is just like Gigorou-san, indeed. Maybe he'd gotten Gigorou's summer cold, I'd thought to myself, but. If my husband weren't like that himself, I'd have had him bring me by car, after all."

"I wonder if that doesn't sound like something the doctor should look at for you after all."

"Of course not. If he sleeps, he'll recover."

"--Poor guy. Getting an amateur's diagnosis."

The one whose voice was tinged with a laugh was Toshio.

"Oh, Doctor. I am sorry for today," Mieko said bowing her head deeply as if profoundly ashamed for troubling him from the very bottom of her heart.

"And? What's up with Gigorou-san?"

Toshio invited Mieko back towards the examination room to check her over as Yasuyo went into the medication room. Ritsuko was just finishing putting a rubber band around the medicine.

"Did the doctor come back in?"

"Mmhm. Say what they will about him, that man is a diligent doctor."

Ritsuko smiled. "He is. ---But it'd still be better if he could watch that mouth of his."

"Never happening, never happening. I've worked here since that one was a child so I'm alllll too familiar with him, he's always been contrary. The more you tell him to watch what he says to the people around him, the more he wants to say the worst."

Ritsuko smiled, offering no comment.

It wasn't long before the Toshio they were speaking of came out with Mieko.

"Ricchan, I gave her her medicine," Toshio said, handing her the file before turning back to Mieko. "Anyway, if it looks bad, have him come in for an exam. If he can't make it in, I'll come give one, so call me."

"I'm truly sorry for the trouble."

"Whether it's a cold or the heat, don't take it lightly. Old people can drop dead in no time flat."

Yasuyo raised her brows as if to chide him for saying something unnecessary again as Ritsuko sputtered out a laugh. But still, as Toshio headed back towards the main wing of his house, Mieko saw him off with a polite bow of her head.

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"Kaori, how long are you going to sleep?"

Her mother Sachiko pulled open the small flower pattered curtain. The white rays of the sun shone directly in Kaori's face, making her roll over in her sleep on top of the futon.

"Hot....."

"It's because you're sleeping so late. It's already ten o'clock! Get up and eat breakfast. It hasn't been put up yet."

Kaori sighed at that distant voice. Sweat clung to her body all over, weighing her down. She didn't have an appetite but if she said that she didn't want it she'd be scolded to 'think of the person who went through the trouble to make it for you!' which she would be without a doubt, so with no other choice she rose. The light summer towel-like blanket stuck to her body, an unpleasant feeling.

It was now August and there was still no rain. With the end of a rainy season that was a rainy season in name only, the frustratingly clear weather continued. The days of a consecutive heat wave heated the air itself, and the nights couldn't clear away the heavy heat by the time the sun rose again. It felt like the heat was only building up in the atmosphere day by day.

"I want an air conditioner..."

Kaori brushed up her sweat drenched hair. Kaori's room had good ventilation. In the mornings it was cool, so there had never been much need for an air conditioner before but this year's summer was special. She couldn't sleep well until late at night, then the sun rose

and she'd wake up hot. She clung to the bed sleepily, but she wouldn't be left to sleep as she liked.

"Stop saying such spoiled things, how about waking up while it's still cool in the morning instead?"

With a mumble of "Yes'm," Kaori watched her mother leave the room. Sluggishly getting dressed before heading downstairs, she was feeling just a little bit cooler. She washed her face and went to the living room where only her serving of breakfast was still sitting out. As she wearily began to eat, with a thump thump came the boisterous footsteps of her little brother Akira.

"What? Kaori, you're just now eating breakfast?"

Akira was two years younger than her and had just entered middle school, putting him in the prime age of cheekiness. He even addressed Kaori without any honorific.

"You're perky today. Even though it's this hot."

"I don't have as much fat on me weighting me down as Kaori does."

"Yes, yes," Kaori muttered. Akira's body heat raised the room's temperature. She couldn't get into the mood to fight with him.

"Hey, want me to give you a chill?" Akira made a face as if planning a prank.

"No thanks. I'm sure you're not thinking of anything good."

"It's not like that," Akira said, his mouth tapering to a sour point. "I heard the family moving into Kanemasa's shown up."

Thinking 'no way', Kaori looked to Akira's face. "Shown up nothing, there's nobody living there is there?"

"Right. Even though no one's living there, people've seen people's shadows they're saying. From the window, all looking out."

"So they have moved in?"

Akira's shoulders sank as if drained of strength. "That's not what I'm talking about at all. Look, in the old house, something had to have happened. I'm talking about ghosts hanging around, and sometimes, they look out the window!"

Nibbling the end of her chopsticks, Kaori tilted her head. "...That'd be weird."

"Why?"

"Because, that building looks old but it was just built recently. Nobody could have lived in it yet, could they? That house couldn't have had anyone die in it."

"That's 'cause I'm talking about them haunting the Kanemasa property. Or, that house was rebuilt? Then it had to have been where it was built before. Something that happened then."

'Is that right', thought Kaori, not satisfied with that. That something unfortunate happened in a house and the ghosts of the dead haunted it was a common enough story. She'd even heard ghost stories about their inhabitants being afraid and tearing down the building, then building up a new one only for them to come out again after all. But.

"If the house moved too would the ghosts move with it? It sounds fishy."

As if his fervor had been sliced down, Akira put his chin in his hands.

"You argue about the weirdest things. But I'm telling you they come out. There're people who've seen it, so that's how it is."

"Didn't they just misunderstand what they saw?"

"They said it's definitely true. And there's more, from inside the wall there was a groaning voice, one guy said he heard it. From inside the fenced in part was a grating, scratching sound, and someone groaning, they said."

Kaori's brows knitted. She didn't like these kinds of stories. "That's just a rumor, I'm sure."

"That might be the case, sure. ---That's why we should go check it out!"

"Don't want to! It's creepy." Kaori gathered the half uneaten breakfast into her rice bowl. "As for me, I don't like that house. It's old and gloomy, it feels strange."

She went to put her bowl in the sink, Akira following her.

"That's why it's great! It's like it's gotta have a story. ---It'll be all right. It's the middle of the day, nothing that scary'll happen."

"Then there's no point in going either is there? If you want to go, why don't you go by yourself at night, Akira?"

"You were the one saying it was just a rumor, weren't you Kaori? We're just going to check it out and see if it feels like that kind of place or not. If we do that, we might see the people from the house by chance too."

"They haven't moved in yet."

"There was talk of the truck that came wasn't there? C'mon, let's just check it out a little."

Kaori breathed a sigh. Akira wouldn't listen to anything she said. He'd follow her around annoyingly all day until she agreed, she could tell by the look in his eyes.

"We'll take a walk by the front of the house but that's it."

Akira broke into a grin. "Okay!"

Going outside, the heat assaulted them from every direction. Going to the dog house by the back door, Love had half of his body in the hole he had dug in there, looking exhausted. Even when Kaori pulled out the leash, he turned away. Love was a mutt with some long haired breed, and chubby. That only seemed to make him feel hotter.

"Look, Love doesn't want to go either," Kaori tried to say but Akira paid it no mind hooking the leash to his collar. As if to say there was no choice, he was going to be drug along, Love lifted his backside. Dejected, Kaori followed after.

The road was baked white and a heat haze shimmered off of it. Akira triumphantly started forward as if chasing after a mirage. The fields were green, and the voices of the cicadas raining down were hot in her ears. Maybe because the asphalt was hot, Love chose to walk in the roadside bushes as he followed Akira.

Kaori's house was in Shita-Sotoba, so it was some distance to the Kanemasa house. There was at least the shade of the trees on a path that came out from the base of Sue no Yama, End Mountain at the west end of the village, so they took an unnecessarily roundabout path. At the foot of the mountains indeed the wind blowing through the firs was pleasingly cool, but with the voices of the cicadas all that much louder, it felt unnecessarily, increasingly hot to her. As she was beginning to regret being drug along by Akira, they came to the intersection of Sue no Yama and the western mountains. A hokora stood on the path that ran along the western mountains.

"Huh?"

Akira who had been leading the way stopped. When she asked what it was, he pointed to the hokora.

"Kaori, look."

Kaori and Love peered into the hokora where Akira pointed. Due to the sun shining blindingly off of the asphalt, the inside of the hokora was at first dim.

In that small hokora, three adults could fit inside though they'd be cramped. In the fenced in interior were an old stone pillar, so worn down it was hard to tell what it was besides a stone, and an offering box. ---No, that was what should have been in there.

"No... What happened here?"

The stone that should have been standing there prominently was thrown back on a bed of concrete. There were many things broken and scattered inside. The stone that should have been in the center was broken in the middle, its offering box smashed, coins scattered on the floor.

"This is Koushin-sama right?"

"Nn," Kaori nodded. At the very least, with the coins still scattered about, it probably wasn't a thief after the offerings. In the first place, more than looking like the tumulus was destroyed in an attempt to break the offertory box, it was more like the goal was to smash up whatever could be reached within.

"This's bad, man. It's all busted up."

Kaori shrunk back a bit. Ever since she was little, she was taught not to play around in hokoras or tumuli. She was told if she did something bad she would be punished. So, seeing such a sight, she had the feeling something that must never happen had happened.

"Say... Akira, let's go back."

Akira turned with a shocked look, asking why.

"It'd be better to tell someone! About this."

For some reason or other, she couldn't leave it like this. What little drive she had to take off in this heat for a long walk was completely whittled away.

Akira stubbornly looked off towards the north of the western mountains but maybe it was still weighing on his mind, because with an obedient nod he tugged on the leash.

"We're going back, Love. We'll scout it out next time."

"Listen to this, Tatsu-san."

Takemura Tatsu was tending to the store, feeling listless when Yaeko and Takeko came hurrying up. They eagerly beckoned her closer with a hand motion.

Tatsu was making use of the fan, turning an indifferent eye towards them. Yaeko and Takeko came rushing off of the baked village road into the shop.

"Have you seen it?"

"Have I seen what?"

"The Jizo statue there!" Yaeko pointed towards the Third Bridge. "His head has fallen off, his head!"

Tatsu scowled, narrowing her eyes against the sun's rays as she set her gaze towards the bridge. What she saw was Oitarou leaning over and inspecting the inside of the small hokora.

"Across the bridge, we met Oitarou-san. Why, he said the hokora at Mizuguchi is broken too. Smashed all to bits. We were just talking about what a bad sign it was, so imagine our surprise when we crossed the bridge. The Jizo's head had fallen off!"

"Oh?" Tatsu murmured. So that was what the fuss was this morning, she thought. When she woke up and looked outside that morning, she had seen a number of old people gathered near the bridge. Tatsu herself didn't have the laudable habit of going to the hokora first thing in the morning but a group of the elderly in the neighborhood would wake up and head straight to the hokora to put their hands together and clean it up. One of them must have seen it and called for the others.

"At any rate, it looks like it was broken sometime at night. All about the head and shoulders is just a mess. Now who could do such a sinful act!"

"Really, who!" said Takeko with an exaggerated grimace. "It's a terrible story! Perhaps it was Ohkawa's son, he's committed a few juvenile, rowdy crimes of that nature and all."

Might have been, Tatsu thought. What would even be the purpose in destroying an old worn out Jizo like that? Of course it was probably destruction for its own sake but she didn't think there was anyone who would sink so low as to destroy that.

As she thought this, Ikumi's face appeared in the shop front. Yaeko snapped up from her stool, voice ringing out.

"Listen Ikumi-san, you, have you seen?"

Ikumi gave a thin laugh. "I know all about it. Mizuguchi too, right?"

"Right. Mizuguchi too. And Kami and Shita, both of them."

Takeko voiced her surprise. "Both of them? The one by Second Bridge and the one furthest down, both of them?"

"Right. This morning I found the one in Shita. After all, it's our own neighborhood. It bothered me so I did a full lap of the neighborhood. Second Bridge's hokora was desecrated, and the one across First Bridge on the coast's Koubou-sama was desecrated too. Kami-Sotoba's furthest one north as well."

Both Yaeko and Takeko's jaws dropped.

"Why... then, all of them along Mizuguchi and the village road?"

"So it seems. Might there be others beyond even that desecrated, I wonder?" Sounding somehow triumphant, Ikumi lowered herself onto one of the folding stools.

"They protect the village, you know. Something wicked's going to happen, here soon." Ikumi said with a thin smile. "You can bet on it. This summer will be inauspicious one."

Shimizu Megumi walked down the road that the sun's light began to slope towards.

Weaving between the rows of houses and fields she headed north. Just as she passed the bridge over the small brook, she'd had a run in with an old woman she'd known in passing. "Oh my, Megumi-chan, aren't you gussied up. Are you going out?"

"Eh," Megumi dodged. She didn't even want to talk with the elderly.

"You've gotten so big. You're already in high school? You've really come into your own as a young lady."

Megumi thought to snap back that she'd heard that line the last time they talked, but it never left her lips. If you made any kind of talk with them they'd never let you go. She'd learned that much.

"Oh, say, say," the old woman said, being cut off by Megumi insisting she was in a hurry and leaving. Whatever it was, it was probably just about the Koushin hokora anyway. There were already two old people who had brought that story up to her since she'd left the house.

It seemed the tumuli and stone monuments here and there in the village were broken last night. The deeply superstitious elderly fussed about it like a crime had been committed but, Megumi couldn't help thinking 'Isn't it just a bunch of rocks?' The bigger oddity was that people nowadays still cleaned and made offerings at them.

(How dumb....)

Megumi mumbled as she hurried ahead. Going from road to road, her goal being north, she walked, drawing nearer and nearer to the western mountains. When she entered the Monzen community, she was at the edge of the western mountains.

Megumi came to the corner turn in the street and looped up the slope that lead up the western mountain. The mansion looked like it came out of a foreign movie. The road from where Megumi stood was a slow rising slope, a slightly elevated ridge that wrapped around to the back of the lumberyard mill in Monzen, but from Megumi's position a private road that continued to the house could be seen. At the end of the leisurely rising road was a somewhat diagonally closed gate. The doors of the gate were made with antique wood, with black metal finish. Were the gate posts brick? The reddish hue was fresh, and the white fence that enclosed was radiantly new. Atop the tall fence were pointed iron rods.

From where Megumi stood, all that could be seen were the fence, those freshly placed, delicate seeming spearheads, and the roof.

Blackened grey stones made up the wall that had a similarly darkened window frame and a door crammed in. The entryway was to the right, and a little further in on the left hand side was a complicated bay window jutting out.

But still, that was all she knew. From the start, the construction site had been surrounded by a tall fence, and while there were places along the outer wall where one could peek, Megumi had no way of knowing what the inside was like. What kind of rooms did it have, what kind of interior design, they were all things she really wanted to know, she thought.

Since June when it had finished until this very day, there was no talk of the owners making to move in. Just when would the master show himself? Even though she'd been waiting for so long for them!

(I'd like to see the inside of the house.)

What kind of rooms would it have? What kind of furniture, and what style of curtains and carpet furnished it? She bet there were paintings on the wall, weren't there? Flowers arranged in flower vases, she assumed.

(I wonder what sort of people live here?)

Did they have a daughter Megumi's age? If they did, she wanted to become friends. What would her room be like? At the least, it would have to be western style to fit in, with large, superb furniture and a plush bed in the corner, three layers of box springs high, it was sure to be completely different from Megumi's room. There would be precisely crafted furniture and patterned, lush carpets, an adult looking desk and dressers, and if she could be allowed to peek through her closet she was sure it would be so much fun.

(I wonder if they have a boy.)

A boy just a little older would be so great---- as she thought that, embarrassment hit her. In the desk she'd used since primary school, hidden in the depths of a pull out drawer was a photograph. It wasn't like she'd confessed to him or anything like that yet but hiding that photo while thinking of the boy who resided in the

mansion made her feel guilty towards the one in the photo.

But yes, if he could be like a kind older brother! The only child Megumi had always wanted an older brother. What she especially wanted was a gallant one. One who could be her confidant, who could do anything, who she could brag to anyone about, an older brother to be the envy of all the girls in her class. How about if she got along well with the boy from that house and was able to go to his room, being line his little sister? ---But he definitely couldn't come into her room. Everything everywhere and anywhere would be dyed with a warm brewed scent, in such a home.

(May they have high school aged children.)

How many times had Megumi said such a prayer since last year when construction began? If they didn't have children, they were sure to be stately old people living there who would spoil her like a grandchild, or alternately a middle aged couple who could treat her as a daughter would be fine too.

(I want in that house.)

If only she could be intimately invited into that home and to be familiar every nook and cranny of it as if it were her own.

(Why can't I be a child of that house?)

Even though it'd be so great if she could. Not the child of a stiff father, not the child of a nagging mother, not the grand child of old grandparents who griped from sun up to sun down.

(I want to go there.)

Megumi started up the slope as if being drawn by something. After only five meters, her feet stopped their ascent. As she would only feel more pitiful if she went any further, and so she couldn't go any closer. She stared up at that unbearable house, where the gate stood in her way, tightly shut as if to reject Megumi.

"Take a good look, here," Ohkawa Tomio showed to customers on each side of the counter.

The Ohkawa liquor shop had a short counter. On the register side there were some chairs so that customers could sample drinks but it ended up becoming a perch for more general drinking. Ohkawa showed his scabbed arms to the group who had gathered seeking pre-dinner drinks. They were the remnants of the injury from day before when an outsider's car drug him along and flung him into a barrel roll.

"Damn, what a son of a bitch," one customer sympathized with a nod. "If it was outsider driving around a luxury car, then we know nothing good's going to come from them. You don't think he's one of them Kanemasa newcomers, do ya?"

"Who knows? Takami-san didn't think so but. Anyway, that's how it all ends. I don't remember his plates, and no one's seeing them around now."

"There's a chance, maybe it was the same guy." An old man with his face flushed red with liquor said. "You know, the Buddhist statue broke by First Bridge last night."

"What?" Ohkawa's eyes flared widely open. "What an abomination! The only ones who'd do that would be outsiders. Outsiders don't got no respect for those kinds of things at all!"

Many customers wholly agreed but there was a customer who had said "I wonder." That old man quietly eyed the one organizing the shelves, Ohkawa's son.

"Don't think it was him do you?"

At the customer's coarse tone, Ohkawa Atsushi looked up.

"Might've snapped and broke them all up, don'tcha think?"

"Trying to swipe the offerings, probably," said one customer laughing at Atsushi. "He's had a sticky fingered habit all his life."

A conspicuous rotten expression rose on Atsushi's acne-scarred face. He made eyes at the customers, then turned away.

"What's with that attitude?" said Ohkawa. "Don't you get cheeky.

Don't think you can be cocky like that just 'cause you've grown big."

Atsushi said nothing, eyeing the shelves. He roughly crammed the canned snacks into place on the shelf, then took the empty cardboard box in hand and stood.

"Oi, Atsushi. Do a neater job of that!"

"I did it," Atsushi answered shortly, taking the box and leaving the store. Behind him he heard Ohkawa grumbling to the customers that in twenty years he'd never been satisfied with how the shelves were sorted.

"The high school passed him out of pity too from the looks of it. Even if he kept going he wouldn't get nowhere with it. He's old enough now but don't got no brains for nothing but trying to act tough. How'd I end up having such a good for nothing brat?"

Atsushi went around to the back side of the shop, throwing out the empty box. He stomped it down with all his might then slapped it onto the mountain of boxes.

Fuck you, Atsushi spat out in his thoughts, leaving from the back of the shop. Like he knew anything about any old stone statues. When he was a kid it was true he'd stolen from the offertory boxes but in the present he wouldn't be happy about the five or ten yen out of an offertory box. They kept dragging out stories from when he was a kid, and he didn't like how they could just write it off as his fault somehow.

Taking the road by the shop, he came out in the shopping district but he didn't really have any place to go. At times like this he was sure running wild in a car or a motorcycle would be just the thing to refresh him but Atsushi had neither a bike nor a car. In high school he had friends who would loan him theirs, but once he graduated and was sucked into the village, his ties were cut. The shop's car and bike's keys were under his parents watch. His mother who was stingy in all she did was cautious about Atsushi wasting gas and refused to hand over the key unless it was for a delivery. If he had his own money it'd be great but Atsushi was made to work in the shop all day without receiving any kind of salary. His parents

told him that since they paid a little to feed him of course he'd be expected to help out in the store.

Atsushi didn't like how they said that about everything. He didn't have anywhere to go or a way to get there, to hang out and fix his sour mood. Not having even one car at his age was so pathetic he couldn't face his friends. He could go by bus or ask them to come pick him up but he couldn't get on board with exposing what a failure he was. By the time he knew it, he was cooped up in these mountains, unable to get out. The elderly were always keeping an eye on him to pull off the mischief he got into as a child, and people his own age drew a line between themselves and him. His parents and younger brother were there but he was the black sheep of the family, and they all looked down on him.

He didn't like it, it wasn't fun, anything and everything was making him mad. Atsushi stormed down the street with all the anger smashing down on the soles of his feet. Stomping around aimlessly, by the time he noticed evening was falling, he'd ended up at the base of the western mountain.

The heat was steaming and the cicadas' voices sounded in the twilight. The villagers were all hurrying to their homes, not a one sparing him a second glance.

---Like he cared. If anyone called out to Atsushi, it'd just be some old person acting like they were so high and mighty in talking to him. Don't just loiter around, your parents are going to worry, stop sponging off your parents and pull yourself together, follow your little brother's example why don't you, he imagined they'd say to him. If not that, they'd act like they were interrogating him for a crime, unabashedly harassing him.

(Bastards making a fool outtah me...)

Atsushi was at times seized by the need to race through the village like a hurricane, to cast away from the place. But, why would Atsushi leave the village like that? If he disappeared, it'd be even better for the village than for him. Atsushi spat at the side of the road, as if trying to spit out something bitter, but that bitterness clung to the inside of his chest, in the back of his mouth, unable to

be released.

Just a ways ahead was the pathway that lead up the western mountain. The slope went towards Kanemasa. There wasn't any special meaning in climbing it but halfway up the hill taking in the sight of that majestic mansion, an unexpected, new thought arose from Atsushi's chest.

It was a mansion built before the summer, its inhabitants having not yet appeared. There were rumors that they'd moved in, and stories about seeing people's shadows and hearing voices but it seemed like the truth was indeed that nobody was there. The house built by outsiders. There was something solemn to it, different from the village. It carved itself into the village to look down at them---to look down on Atsushi.

Atsushi stood before that firmly sealed gate. The mansion stood creepily against the madder red sky, naturally devoid the presence of people. Atsushi casually surveyed the surroundings. Of course, there was no sign of anyone.

Nobody's here. ----Nobody's looking.

From there, Atsushi looked up at the affecting gates.

(Nobody would know if I snuck in.)

He put a hand on the wooden gate about body height, eyes shifting side to side.

He could go into the grounds, into the mansion itself. Even if he smashed in a window and smeared mud all over the inside, nobody was watching to know it was Atsushi's handiwork. On the contrary, because nobody lived there, if something like that were done, it would happen without anybody knowing it even happened. He didn't know if the owner would move in, but as soon as they did, they'd see the inside of their home laid to waste.

(Not a bad idea.)

Atsushi's mouth warped into a smile. Those bastards moving in would sure be surprised. They built up an exaggerated mansion like

this, planning on looking down on the villagers but, this cheeky little snot would literally be slinging mud at them, and just thinking about it made some of his built up frustrations lift.

"Alright," he lightly voiced before clambering over the gate. Leaving footprints on the newly painted tawny gates and the brand new black metal fixtures was fun. He went up the gate with a deliberate kick. Twilight fell on the broad courtyard, and in that isolation a desolate feeling arose. He jumped down into that isolation. Without knowing who the target was, he thought 'serves you right.'

Where to sneak in from---thought Atsushi as he looked up. The wall had a pretentious stone pattern, and there was a window to the right of the massive and intimidating front of the building. Curtains were smartly hung, and through a small crack in them, peaked the darkness coiled within.

'Should I break the glass there to get in?' he thought. The window had a thin frame in a shape he couldn't get through even if he'd broken the glass and, in the first place, that was boring, he now thought.

He didn't want to do something that flashy. He should infiltrate more stealthily. If he did, the people moving in wouldn't notice until they entered their fine house that the inside that was all laid to waste.

With a thin smile Atsushi followed the outer wall around towards the back. Atsushi didn't know specifics but it was definitely an extravagant building. The walls were certainly dignified, and the roof was high .The aged stone walls precisely closed in an enormous amount of space. Within them was sure to lurk that darkness seen before through the crevices in the curtains.

Passing around the front to turn the corner to the side, he came into the building's shadow. Right at the side was a thin path wedged between the building and another building that appeared to be a garage. Its brand new white coated shutter was drawn.

Atsushi looked about his surroundings, confirming that he was

completely surrounded by the wall and the building, removed from the outside view. He kicked those shutters twice, three times. The scream let out by the metal reverberated through the garage, against the nearby outer wall, a startlingly loud echo. Without thinking he cowered. Too much noise made him unsettled.

(No one's here...)

Or no one should have been. The building was isolated in the western mountains with no neighbors. No matter how much of a riot he raised, it shouldn't have reached anyone's ears. Even knowing as much, he couldn't help looking around. Feeling like any minute now someone would demand to know who was there, Atsushi was a little afraid. He'd intended to kick the shutter enough to dent it but seeing a scratch was good enough. ---Right, his goal was to infiltrate the inside of the building.

Between the house and the garage wound a very narrow pathway. It was already cloaked in a thin darkness making it so that he couldn't see it clearly. It appeared to be a dead end but at the end there might have been a door or a window facing the pathway. Keeping his eyes on his surroundings, Atsushi stepped onto that dimly lit path looking for a route further back, for a way in as he walked.

There were fewer openings than he'd have thought. There was one window facing the road but it was about Atsushi's height and closed with a wooden door. There was no place to get his footing and it didn't look like he could get in through there. At the end of the pathway was nothing more than a wall in his way. It was just a pathway connecting the garage to the building. Atsushi clicked his tongue. As he turned to go back, his body stiffened faintly.

Suddenly, there was someone behind him, he could feel it. Why he felt that way, he himself didn't know. He was there, deep between the darkness of the stone wall and the garage in that narrow alleyway. Someone was behind him, watching him from behind. He had a premonition of someone standing in his way at the entrance of that pathway.

(No way...)

That shouldn't have been. Nobody lived here yet. Atsushi gradually looked behind himself. He saw beyond the dark pathway to the garden bathed in the remaining afterglow of twilight. Of course, between Atsushi and the entrance, there was no hint of anyone to be seen.

Just as he was going back along the path, thinking that it was his imagination and embarrassed at his own mistake, at the halfway point, again, Atsushi stopped. This time, from the depths of the alleyway instead of at the entrance, he felt a gaze. It was from where he had just walked away from, behind him, no---just above him.

With a start Atsushi looked up. Above the melancholy hue of the outer wall was one second story window. Outside of the glass was not a wooden door but an iron lattice of bars in place.

This is bad, he realized. No one should have been there, yet he had the feeling that he was being watched from someone. That window. Someone was there looking down at him.

They had moved in, there were rumors about it. Maybe without anybody knowing, the master had been able to move in.

No---Though Atsushi. He'd heard an even stranger rumor. Here there was a master here who should not have been, it said. It was a ghost story for children.

(Couldn't be.)

Even while thinking as much his feet sped up. He came off of the pathway into the garden but he still couldn't fight the feel of being watched. Atsushi looked up at the house. That house with a strangely intimidating aura, that dark house.

As he thought about what an unsettling feeling he had, just then, from the end of that pathway he'd just come out of, he thought he heard something. A sound like somebody stepping on the gravel spread out in that alleyway.

That shouldn't have been, there was no door out to the pathway.

It was certain there was nobody there. But he felt someone's footsteps were creeping, that someone was coming closer.

Atsushi raced back to the gate. He left a scuff on the garage; he'd call that enough for the day. Looking behind himself so many times, he climbed over the gate. The surrounding mountains he looked over were covered in the forest of firs, the deep shadows of those trees beckoning the night to fall on the village that much more quickly.

Jumping off of the gate, Atsushi ran down the hill. That was when, at the sides of the hill, from within the underbrush summoning down the evening, he heard a rustling sound. He turned away from the source of the sound, hurrying his legs faster. It was clearly rushing after Atsushi. As Atsushi went from a jogging pace to an all-out run, it followed after him into the village.

Atsushi, without any concern for the way he flailed as he ran, rushed down the slope. He came to a corner when the sound cutting through the underbrush ceased. As he looked back at that, after what seemed to be a moment of hesitation, he returned to the slope above where the sound had been heard. In the undergrowth, he thought he'd seen a glimpse of what looked like dog hair.

(A dog....?)

Atsushi sighed. Come to think of it, he'd heard there were a lot of stray dogs about recently. That's all, he thought, relieved, only to immediately become angry with his own relief. It was a blessing that no one was looking. But to be scared of a dog and change his mind to run away! While he'd finally managed to sneak onto the grounds, he ran back only leaving a mark on the shutters.

He couldn't contain his frustration with himself, who would do such a thing. It was disgusting, that he was the type to let himself take such a bumbling action. He hated it all. --That slope, that house too, really, just every last thing.

The children's playground was a confined space. It was the riverbed of the mountain stream; the Shinto shrine was on the opposite side of the bridge, the place of the Otabisho where the

gods' palanquins resided during festivals, that place in the shade of the fir trees.

Yuusuke crossed the bridge in front of his house, going towards the Shinto shrine. As the sun set, the shrine grounds were abandoned. He knew that nobody was there. At the corner of his house was the bridge, and he'd seen the children return from the shrine across it. He was crouched with his newly bought miniature car but nobody paid him any attention or called out to Yuusuke.

Katou Yuusuke was the neighborhood's only first grader. The oldest of the children younger than him was Makoto, three years old, and there were a group of three third grade students who were the closest to his age out of those who were older. He'd been born in an area without many kids. So Yuusuke was alone. The kids younger than Yuusuke each had their own playmates. He'd seen them coming and going across the bridge with a ball and bat looking happy about something and while it seemed like there might have been something really fun over there, the shrine was just a shrine.

Still gripping his miniature car, Yuusuke stood in the shrine's archway. In that wide open space was the closed main hall and the open Kagura hall. One building had its doors firmly shut as if tightly holding something inside; the other building, in contrast, was wide open, a gaping space without walls. In the corners were small Inari harvest gods, withered banners, and the sacred trees, dark and condescending.

He came to this Shinto shrine often. His grandmother Yukie brought him every morning to clean. Being at the shrine in the mornings was, to Yuusuke, like being in another's tatami room. There was nothing there, but it seemed there was, and it made him feel prickly. At midday, the shrine was like another's tea room or kitchen. It was a place Yuusuke couldn't enter, a place it disappointed him a bit not to be able to enter.

"House sitting."

Yuusuke looked over the shrine after the sun had set and summed it up thusly. Being at the shrine at dusk was like house sitting. Full

of empty crevices and corners he knew well, it still seemed like an unfamiliar place. There were recently many people here due to the festival, so it only felt all the more like that.

Yuusuke set his mini car down and in exchange picked up a stone. He tried to do like the older kids and throw the stone over the top of the shrine arch but it wasn't even a little bit fun. Why were those kids in such high spirits? Realizing the car was better than the rock, he gripped it tightly. But with that said, it wasn't as if it'd be more fun because he was gripping a model car either.

He kicked a stone a little ways, and it rolled into the darkness of the thicket. Suddenly the wind blew and the branches creaked. The cicadas could be heard crying as if they were jumping to their feet in surprise by something.

This wasn't any fun. It was a creepy place.

Yuusuke retreated. Even with that said, going home like this gave him the feeling that he was overlooking the most fun place. Though of course there wouldn't be anything fun there, because there was nobody else there.

While caught up in his worries, he compared what he could see of the darkness of the trees shadows with the bridge beyond it. At the front of that bridge was a storefront with a light. That electronics shop was Yuusuke's house. His father was always busy with something called 'deliveries' and 'construction' and going off in his car, and his grandmother tended to the shop. Yuusuke went to school, came home, and played alone. Yuusuke had no mother. He'd seen pictures and had seen the gravestone and grave for one called his mother but he'd never actually, practically had one. His father said that she died when Yuusuke was young. As for what it meant to die, Yuusuke didn't really know. He thought that it was probably akin to being captured by one of the Oni that crept down from the mountains.

'Oni', he thought with a fright. He mustn't be out walking once the sun had gone down. Even if his father was late with a 'delivery', so dinner would be a ways off, even if his grandmother was in the kitchen so it would mean having to watch TV all by himself, he had

to be in the house by dark. Because the Oni would come.

Gripping the miniature car, prepared to throw it as soon as an Oni appeared, he gradually stepped back. Once he was under the shrine archway, he pivoted about towards the bridge and dashed. Once halfway across the bridge, he saw the light beyond the pane of glass in the shop, so he stopped. He looked above his house where he saw the light shining. On the western mountains, a black shadow stretched out.

(I know the truth.) Yuusuke totteringly crossed the rest of the bridge. (That's where the Oni are.)

Granny may have said that they came from the grave but obviously even an Oni wouldn't want to be in the ground. So they were in that creepy house. They hid in there and waited for the night. And that was where they brought everyone. That was obvious.

Because he was catching his breath, he surely wouldn't miss what happened on the mountain slope he was looking up at, one small light flickering on, which Yuusuke did not overlook. Much further west then the mountain temple, and in a place higher than the Ozaki Clinic or the lights shining from the row of houses in Monzen, it was there.

(There...)

Before Yuusuke's very eyes as he watched, two, three times it flickered, then that light disappeared.

Yuusuke thought that it was a sign of something scary. He nervously crossed the riverbank roadway and then took off running back to the shop.

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4

"Oh my, welcome."

As Seishin stepped into the book shop, Tashiro Rumi was standing at the register. The window facing the outside was flooded with the sun's rays but inside the shop the air conditioner was running. Seishin wiped his sweat with relief.

"Good day. I'd gotten a call from Masa-san that the book I'd requested had come in?"

"Just a min, if you please." Rumi said to Seishin, as she searched the depths of the register's shelves. On the shelves he could see several volumes with medical titles. They must have been Toshio's order.

The only book shop in the village was this, the Tashiro Bookstore, managed by Mr. and Mrs. Tashiro. While it wasn't hard to find a store with newspapers or magazines in the corner, there were no other shops that specialized in books. Formerly, when it was in Monzen or Gate Front, it was literally in front of the mountain gate and handled the sutra texts and drawings but when the predecessor moved to the outskirts of the shopping district, he opened shop as a book store. It was once a very small home used as a shopfront but, the household portion was demolished and the shop expanded to add more shelves about ten years ago, when the predecessor's son Masaki's time came. Tashioro Masaki was two grades ahead of Seishin, and had gone to the same school as him from primary through highschool.

"Is this it I wonder? I'm sorry, Papa went out to warm the seats at the cafe." Rumi took out a pack of books bound by a single rubber

band. She eyed the memo note stuck to the bundle and nodded once. "This is it. ---It looks like two volumes haven't come in yet. There is no literary agent for them, so we'll try contacting the publisher."

"Sorry for the trouble."

Rumi smiled and gathered the books into a paper bag. As she was passing by back to the register either looking over or seeking something on the shelves, there was the sound of the door opening and a cheerful voice wafting in a "Hello!" along with the hot air.

"Boy, sure is hot out there." It was neighborhood resident Takami. His house was catty corner from the Tashiro Bookstore. "I thought I saw the Junior Monk come in here."

"It really is hot, yes."

Rumi bowed her head to Takami. Takami returned the bow while saying: "Junior Monk, have you heard?"

"About what?"

"Well, there's more talk about the Benz, but."

"My," Rumi said, her hands stopping. "Is this about Maeda-san, that car that threw her Shigeki-kun off of his bike? Come to think of it, the Junior Monk just happened to have been there!"

Tashiro Rumi's own home was currently in the same neighborhood as the Maeda household, Kami Sotoba.

"Yes."

"The missus of the Maeda house is neurotic. Ever since that she's just been so tense. She even goes to radio exercises with him."

"Oh boy," Takami said, shocked. Rumi gave a smile mixed with a sigh.

"It's not that I can't understand how she feels. The highway is

nearby. I tell my children not to go near the highway too but, children want to go where you tell them not to. What's worse, across the highway is the Horie Auto lot, yes? They've been told it's dangerous over there but I've spied kids over there countless times."

Horie Auto was an automobile repair shop. Behind the garage was a rather spacious lot for decommissioned vehicles. It was a source of many of the village's parental headaches. To the kids, there was no other place to play. But that 'playground' was dangerous, and there was no way to get to it other than to cross the highway.

"There's a crosswalk and a stop light there, though. Why do those folks from out of town always overlook that."

"Really. The PTA had just met and someone brought up, how about a pedestrian bridge? But I wonder if they'd even use it if there were."

"Exactly. And a pedestrian bridge would be hard on the elderly too."

The ones to meet with misfortune on the highway were primarily children and the elderly. Takami gave a grieving sigh, then as if remembering, looked to Seishin. "Right, so, about that car again, there was a big debacle."

"What happened?"

"Yeah, that night someone said that they saw it. The Ohtsuka Sawmill's son."

"At night, you say?"

"Yes. It was at a pretty late hour, when it seems he met with a dark Benz driving down the village road, leaving the village. Seems he was still up to his usual dangerous driving habits. That was around eleven at night, he said. That guy, I wonder just where in the village he was up 'till then." Takami said with an exaggerated sigh. "On our end, we were sure that he was a hit and run with that child, so we were thinking he had left town and was hiding out out

there somewhere. We think that, then he hides himself somewhere in the village and then brazenly leaves by the main village road. Just think, we really should have stationed a watch at the entrance to the village and looked around here and there a little more, huh?"

"While you say it hid, that car would stand out anywhere it stopped."

The rumor that a car had hit a child should have spread through the village in a flash. With that said, even if it was called a village, in all reality it covered a rather large area. So while surely not all of the people would know about it after all, it was certain that a large number of them did, and they would have been looking out for an unfamiliar car.

"That's exactly right," said Takami, his voice going low. "That's why, you know, there's been talk that it must have been the Kanemasa's car."

"It couldn't be."

"Yeah, but really can you think of anything else? Until it left the village, nobody had laid eyes on her! The electronics shop's Katou-san--Yukie-san from there saw it fleeing up the village road but, after that, nothing. And the electronics shop's right at the Ichino bridge."

Ah, Seishin nodded. Ichino bridge was quite far north, so the problem car was going either towards Kami Sotoba and if not that then towards Monzen. ---But, once it had gone north, it could drive around from there, so it wasn't necessarily limited to those places, not really.

(No) thought Seishin. (Kami Sotoba or Monzen--if neither, possibly Yamairi.)

North of the village, on another side of the northern mountain was that community of sparse plots of land.

"Kanemasa is in Monzen, isn't it. So we were thinking it might have gone to the Kanemasa mansion. If it went in behind the wall

and closed the gates, they wouldn't catch the village folk's sights, would they? And then they hid out there until all signs of life had petered out."

"Is there not also Yamairi?"

Impossible, Takami waved off. "There's nothing but three old folks up there. If he went there, he'd definitely stand out."

"But Kanemasa is set out to the west of Monzen. If you're saying he went to Kanemasa, he would have to cross through Monzen but in doing that, don't you think he would be sure to be seen by somebody?"

"Ah, that's right. There's that too," Takami tilted his head. "Just in case, it'd be better to ask the old folks in Yamairi about it, then."

"Mightn't it have been Kanemasa?" The one who added such to the conversation was Rumi. "It's just so creepy, that house. It's, how to put it, suspicious."

"Right." Takami nodded in agreement. "Yeah, Katou-san's squirt---Yuusuke-kun, was it? That kid, he was tending to the shop with his grandma and saw the car, he's saying it went to Kanemasa. Now, he wasn't saying he saw it go to Kanemasa of course, but he said that's definitely where it went."

Takami forced a smile.

"Somehow Yuusuke-kun seems to think of that house on Kanemasa to be a haunted mansion or a villain's hide-out. So, if it's a car driven by a bad guy, of course he'll say it was Kanemasa, but that's a child's thinking."

"I see," Seishin and Rumi smiled.

"But among the kids, there seems to be a strange story. That they've seen people near Kanemasa or heard strange voices or something."

"Ah," Rumi rose her voice. "That's right. Our child had been talking about it, about that. About seeing a person going up the

Kanemasa hill at night or about a person seen through the window even though there shouldn't be anyone there."

"Right," Takami nodded. "I'm not sure what I think of taking kid's gossip too seriously, though. But adults are saying it too, like--they've seen light through the storm shutters or there are people saying they've heard sounds from within the walls."

"Wasn't it their imagination, or some sort of mistake?" Seishin asked, causing Takami to tilt his head.

"I wonder, huh?"

"At any rate, it's been built a long time and left uninhabited, and on top of that, having the strange style that building does, it can't help becoming the topic of ghost stories. If someone were really coming and going, there wouldn't be such vague stories, there would be more specific ones going around."

Takami tilted his head, deep in thought. Seishin went on.

"Perhaps from the outside it appears finished but inside there's still some construction that needs to be done, so people are coming and going. If it were the owner, they probably wouldn't come and go so stealthily."

"About that, since they hit a kid like that, maybe there's no choice but to be stealthy like that?"

"In that case, I'd imagine they wouldn't come by at all until things had cooled off. I do think it's just a ghost story, myself, but."

"Maybe so," Takami said, but he didn't seem satisfied with that explanation.

Rumi breathed a sigh.

"Either way, if they would just hurry up and move on in for us, it'd be a weight off of everyone's shoulders, already."

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5

""Fuki-san, good evening."

Yano Tae directed at the person in the brightly lit living room, carrying a small bowl in hand. Gotouda Fuki turned around as if surprised.

"Oh my, it's Tae-chan," she said as she went out towards the veranda. The reason her feet drug as she walked was because Fuki suffered from arthritis. She opened the screen door and with a light grimace, she knelt.

"I made too much of this side dish. I thought you might like some, Fuki-san."

"Thank you so much, as always."

"My daughter has dinner at the shop, so I'm alone, you know. But, it's hard to only make enough for one, isn't it? But even so, I don't feel like going to the shop and eating something greasy."

"Once you get old, western style food is just..." Fuki said, gratefully receiving the offered bowl. With her hand on her knee, she stood, though it appeared to be a struggle. "Well, do come in and sit down."

Watching as Fuki drug her feet along into the house, Tae took a seat on the veranda. The living room was quiet and still. How unusual that the television wasn't on. There was no sign of Fuki's son Shuuji.

He'd gone out somewhere then, had he? How unusual. Shuuji was thirty eight, no, had he turned thirty nine now? He was Fuki's

youngest child. He failed to get married and still remained in the home. It seemed he went drinking frequently at the drive-in where her daughter worked but he didn't have any friends to invite to go drinking with him. Kanami said that the counter would become gloomy when Shuuji came to the shop and that he didn't seem well received.

Tae sat on the veranda, thinking about Shuuji's whereabouts. She wasn't that terribly interested. Just, when she peeked into the living room from outside, sitting in the brightly lit room was Fuki all alone. When she saw such a sight, it was like something got caught in her throat. Just seeing an old person sitting there in isolation made her feel lonely herself. Without a doubt, she whose daughter was away at the shop as she ate alone was seen in the same way, which made it all the more lonesome.

"We're fresh out of everything, so I can't offer anything." Fuki returned with a tray.

"Don't fuss over me," said Tae before moving on. "By the way, Fuki-san, do you know if the people in the Kanemasa house have moved in?"

"I haven't heard anything, but have they moved in?"

"They must have. This morning when I got up to wash my hands, I saw a light on."

"Are you sure you didn't make a mistake?"

"I'm sure. I'd seen it before. I thought then that maybe I was mistaking what I saw so this time I paid good, good attention when I saw it. What I saw was definitely Kanemasa. If it wasn't Kanemasa, then since there aren't any street lights there and such, there isn't anyone else who could be coming and going at night."

"That is certainly true."

"That house, though, there's something creepy about it, isn't there. I'm really without a doubt there was a light on. But, a light being on even when there shouldn't be anyone there, what do you

think that's about?"

"Who knows," Fuki returned to Tae who sat on the veranda. She herself recognized it as a curt response. It'd be nice if you recognized that I don't care about this conversation, but, she thought. And if you won't think too poorly of me for it, that would also be good, but.

"Moving here when they have no ties here in itself seems like there should be some pretext. I hope they're not too strange of people, but."

"Uh huh...." Her voice was still curt. As if Tae suddenly realized it, she made a bewildered face.

"It seems I've interrupted something."

Because you have, Fuki hesitated to say back. "Right now, Shuuji is ill in bed."

"Oh my, a summer cold?"

"I don't think that's what it is but, I mean, for someone who's never been sick once to be bedridden, I don't know what to think."

"That's true. I'm so sorry, barging in when you're preoccupied."

"Oh no, nothing of the sort."

"It's fine, please, think nothing of it. Even if it's one summer cold, you're worried and distracted, so be sure to take care."

Fuki nodded and Tae stood. With a 'later', she started down the dusk-lit path.

I wonder if I'd done something wrong, Fuki thought. Tae lived with her daughter Kanami who worked at the drive-in, and Kanami didn't leave the shop until late, so Tae was lonely in her home. She tried to find some reason for coming all the way across the village to visit.

"....Sorry about this, Tae-chan."

With a murmured apology, Fuki turned her gaze to Kanemasa. That slope that was supposed to have a home was nothing but darkness. Turning away as she had no interest, Fuki went back into her living room, past the wide open sliding door to the corridor. "Nee, Shuuji. Tae-chan brought some boiled goods, won't you eat?"

As Fuki called out, she headed deeper down the corridor. She peered into her son's room. With the sliding screen door left open, there was no light on. The smell of the mosquito coil Fuki had lit thinly stagnated.

"Shuuji?"

Fuki's son lied in the futon gazing at the ceiling. His wide open eyes looked as if they were not looking at this world but peering into another one.

Fuki breathed a sigh. Her one and only youngest son was ultimately left in her care. He was fresh on the verge of forty but he had neither a wife nor children. If Tae was all alone with her daughter, Fuki was all alone with her son. That son's condition, ever since he returned from the community north of the village, Yamairi, had been strange.

"Are you all right? You haven't eaten all day."

Fuki placed her hand on her son's forehead but the skin beneath her hand was almost pleasantly cool to the touch. Even that got no reaction from her son. Blinking as if remembering something, he stared at the ceiling.

North of the village, located on the other side of the northern mountain, the community of Yamairi was isolated. It was originally a settlement at the entrance to the mountains but as forestry became obsolete the number of inhabitants dwindled and presently there were no more than three old people living there. One of those elders was Fuki's own older brother. Shuuji went to visit his uncle Hidemasa in Yamairi five days ago, after calling about the time she was thinking of going to bed to say he was going to Yamairi, that son who always went drinking after work.

Fuki thought it was because of the alcohol at first but Shuuji had heard at Chigusa that Hidemasa wasn't doing well, he'd said. It seemed that her sister-in-law Mieko had come down to the village to do some shopping and said as much to him. He said he was worried so he was going to pay him a visit and Fuki herself didn't feel it too necessary to stop him, so she said take care and hung up the phone. He came back much later that night and since then had been like this. The next day he seemed languid but the day after that he was bedridden. He had neither a fever nor a cough. Looking as if his soul had been spirited away, his face pale, he lied there and all day today. Even if Fuki called out to him, he wouldn't even turn to look at her.

"Shuuji, hey."

As expected, no response. Pouring his gaze up into the ceiling, he was heavily muddled.

She thought to call the doctor. Doctor Ozaki, unlike his predecessor, didn't mind house calls. But she wondered if she should really call him.

Fuki's son had been acting strange ever since he had returned from Yamairi while she slept. The next day, when Fuki came to wake him, Fuki found Shuuji's summer bedding sullied. It looked like blood. In surprise she pulled back the futon blanket to see Shuuji sleeping in his clothes, his hand and those clothes stained deep brown and giving off a stench. She quickly examined her sleeping son's body but he didn't seem to be especially injured.

Even if she asked him what on earth happened, her son didn't give any response. She tried to call her brother to see if he'd known anything but there was no answer. She had a very bad feeling. For some reason her brother and his wife weren't answering the phone and her son was in that condition. If Fuki could drive either a car or a motorcycle, she would by all means to go see how her brother and his wife were doing but---even while thinking that, Fuki understood that it was nothing but an excuse. She couldn't say why, but she was somehow afraid.

"Nee, Shuuji.... Did something happen?"

Fuki asked of him, when he let out a grumbling voice. Shuuji groaned from deep in his throat. It was certain he was giving a response but, what he wanted to say wasn't conveyed.

"----Shuuji?"

But he gave no further response. Shuuji closed his eyes as if in annoyance, and the beginnings of the shallow breath of sleep could be heard. Fuki came to a decision as she stood. If tomorrow he was still like this then tomorrow for sure she would call the Junior Doctor to pay a visit, she thought. Yes, she could just stay quiet about the blood. Surely it had nothing to do with a medical examination.

She returned to the living room through the hallway, thinking 'something might have happened to my son'. The sound of her footsteps followed her every step echoing thoughts that "something did happen." Something---something to stain Shuuji in blood, something to keep her older brother and his wife from answering the phone.

(It couldn't be. What am I thinking?)

She scolded herself but still her unease didn't depart. Her introverted son. Fuki was well familiar with that son's unexpectedly easily enraged side. Furthermore her son and Hidemasa had gotten into a big fight over something at work just the day before. Her son was a mild man but once he'd been drinking, if he snapped, it was bad. Especially towards family.

(What am I thinking? There's no reason to call to mind something like this, no reason at all.)

Fuki hung her head and returned once again to the living room with no trace of any others, where she was for a long while caught in thought.

--The next morning, Fuki looked within the futon to find her son dead.

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Links to Chapter 2:
Chapter 2 - 1
Chapter 2 - 2
Chapter 2 - 3
Chapter 2 - 4
Chapter 2 - 5

Edits to Part 1:

Added to

Chapter 1 Translation Notes:

Family Honorifics and reference for siblings, General Japanese Faith/Spirituality/Supernatural Based Translation Notes, Hokora, Jizo, Tengu

Changed all translations of hokora as shrines back to hokora due to needing to distinguish it from the larger shrine in later chapters (changes are in Seishin's Essay and Chapter 1-2).

Chapter 2 Translation Notes:

Chapter 2-1
Villages, Towns; Mizobe, annexations, Sotoba vs. Sotoba Village

- Government and addresses in Japan are arranged, from top down: Nation (Japan, the country), Prefecture (47 total), to Municipalities. Think federal, state, county, for Americans.

Municipalities are either designated as cities, towns, or villages based on population, among other factors. Because it cuts down on red tape to pool resources, there is a push for annexation; thus, Sotoba was absorbed into the larger nearby town of Mizobe and should technically not be designated as a

village

any longer. Cities are generally broken down into wards or towns listed on mailing envelopes, then district, blocks, and house numbers.

While a 'town' can be a direct breakdown of a prefecture, breakdowns of cities are also called towns, as a carry over from the tendency of towns to be built on the outskirts of cities only to be annexed later. The seven portions of Sotoba, Kami-Naka-Monzen, Shimo-Sotoba-Mizuguchi, and Yamairi are translated as neighborhoods or communities.

Chapter 2-3
Koushin-sama

- Something of a lost folksy god derived from blending Buddhism, Shintoism and Taoism, Koushin is a Taoist god who is believed to prevent worms in the body from sneaking out every 60th night and telling higher order gods about people's bad deeds, which would lead to punishment. The three monkeys covering their eyes, mouths and ears represent how he won't allow God or the worms to hear, see or speak of people's evil. He's also a god of agriculture who blesses harvests and crops on those 60th days. An

example

of a hokora with Koushin, from hikabekagu.exblog.jp.

Tumulus/Tumuli

- Memorial sites, mounds of dirt or rocks raised up over a grave-

site. Often used to commemorate local legends, there are usually markers such as plants or statues or the like. Maintenance of them is considered a good deed and holy work. They vary in size; no image as they're generally just, well, mounds.

Koubou-sama

- Buddhist monk Kukai, founder of the Shingon or "True Word" school of Buddhism One of Japan's most famous holy figures, he was important in literature, religion and government in his day. Was given the title Koubou Daishi after death, Koubou translating as "spreading or teaching Buddhism." and Daishi as "Great Teacher."

Example

of a Koubou statue.

Shinto Temples

Shinto temples are denoted on maps by the arch gates that mark their entrance, and the general entrance into holy areas. There are no doors on them, they're really more of a flat-topped arch called a tori than a gate.

Example

of an arch from Wikimedia Commons. Buddhist temples may also have these, but more commonly (or in addition to the arches) have gates Near the entrance is a fountain for purification/hand washing.

The

Kagura Hall

is an open stage originally used for Noh plays and musical offerings to the gods.

Example

of a Kagura Hall from Flickr.

The

Main Hall

where the shrine god, represented by a statue, mirror or other symbol, resides. It remains consistently closed to the public.

Example

of a Main Hall from Wikimedia Commons.

As the main hall is off limits to the public, public worship takes place in a

worship hall

. This is where the bell ringing and general worship take place.

Otabisho

- The place where the god's palanquin, or portable shrines, rests during festivals. Usually still on shrine grounds. Gods don't leave their shrines other than during festivals, when they're put in portable shrines and carried about, for example during the Shinkousai for celebration. They may be left out for only one day or for several days, during special celebratory periods.

Inari

- Gods of harvests, usually rice specifically, represented by foxes that tend to serve as Inari's messengers or workers. There are many stories and legends surrounding them, and several different gods that are associated with Inari.

Example

of an Inari statue with banners.

--I don't remember where this came in but it's in my notes for things to culture note. I'll just stick it here:

Household/Family Shrines

- Not just limited to roadsides, homes often have Shinto shrines meant to house gods as well. Charms known as Ofuda are stored in them and prayers are said at the house-bound shrine where offerings of food and drink are to be set out. An

example

of a household shrine from Yosokan Dojo, with the mirror being the object housing the god.

sinnesspiel

Chapter 3

1

Seishin received notice of the death on July eighth, early on a Saturday morning. Just finished with the morning services, he left the main temple to Ikebe and Tsurumi, going on ahead to the living quarters, just as Mitsuo was stepping out of the temple office.

"Ah, Junior Monk," his voice called out as he half-ran down the corridor, Mitsuo's demeanor indicating there must have been an emergency indeed. "There was a call just now. It seems the Gotouda household's Shuuji-san has passed away."

Seishin blinked. "Shuuji-san? That can't be."

Even if it was a small village, it wasn't as if he knew everybody who lived there but at the very least Seishin knew that Shuuji was a man in good health and not at an age where sudden death was to be expected.

"Was there an accident?"

"Complications from a summer cold, his mother was saying, but. The Koike household's Masaharu-san will come to meet with you as the funeral manager if you have the time."

"I understand. Thank you very much."

Mitsuo nodded and headed into the living quarters hallway towards the main building. Changing places with him, Seishin entered into the temple office. Looking at the blackboard, he could see Mitsuo's solemn writing, "Gotouda, Meeting, Koike."

The village had an institution called the Mourning Crew. The village had no undertaker. In its place they had the Mourning Crew. Anytime there was a misfortune in a community, the neighbors would get everyone together to help. The women were necessary for the mourner's meal and of course the men's help was indispensable for burying the deceased. The village still buried its dead. Graveyards for each household were established in the mountains that encircled the village, and digging the grave holes there, as well as hoisting the coffins up there and putting the dirt back over them would be impractically hard labor without male hands on board. The Mourning Crew's local representative would serve as a manager on the occasion of a funeral in place of an undertaker, assigning all the other roles. From arranging for a coffin and any related mediation, to everything roughly related to the funeral, he managed it. The elderly of the Koike family had been serving as the heads of the Naka-Sotoba Mourning Crew for some time.

(A summer cold....)

Shuuji was surely only six, maybe seven years older than Seishin, wasn't he? He had come to Buddhist memorial services so he knew his face well, but they weren't what you would call particularly close, by any means. If he recalled, he lived together with his mother. Certainly, his mother Gotouda Fuki must have been despondent.

(It's just, too soon.)

While caught in his melancholy, he headed deeper into the living quarters. He peeked into the living room but didn't see his mother. And so he left the living quarters to the separate building--or as much as one could call it separate when only stepping out a little ways from the main wing of the house--to assist in feeding his father at his bedside. "Good morning," he said, seeing his father for the first time that morning.

This building called a separate one was the single western style building at the temple. His father Shinmei's gaunt body laid on the bed, which he could raise to a half-up position with the electric remote at his bedside. Last year he suffered a stroke and ever since

his limbs had been paralyzed. With his age adding to matters, since becoming bedridden his condition was worsening steadily. He could just barely manage to hold a fork and spoon but he could neither stand nor walk.

"Father, it appears Gotouda household's Shuuji-san has passed away. What shall we do about his posthumous name? "

His father and mother both looked at Seishin in surprise.

"That's, but he was still young."

Beside Miwako who was at a loss for words, Shinmei put down the spoon as if trying to throw it down.

"Shuuji..... Fuki-san's, youngest son, was he?"

Ever since falling ill, Shinmei's words were spoken haltingly. That he could speak, even inarticulately, gave an idea of his strength of will, of the impression of his wisdom.

Miwako drew her brows together, nodding at Shinmei.

"Shuuji-kun, who sold woodworking joints, yes? Was it said how he passed?"

"Something about summer cold complications. The Koike's Masaharu-san will be coming shortly..."

"Mm. I'll think, on the, posthumous, name."

Seishin nodded his head slightly. Even now he consulted with Shinmei about everything relating to the temple. The head monk of the temple was ultimately still Shinmei, with Seishin as the assistant chief, merely Shinmei's proxy. Being the head monk of the head temple had nothing to do with ability. It was a position based on a relationship of trust with the parishioners.

"Call, Toshio-kun."

"Yes. I will ask him about the state of things."

"And, the cemetery, arrangements."

Shinmei spoke shortly, Seishin nodded. Burying a person would require a plot of land large enough to do so. For each who died, the cemetery would have to be organized so that a spot wide enough for one was assured. A fir tree would be planted over the former mound, and its roots would dig out space. It wouldn't cause problems as long as the cemetery was organized.

"I will make arrangements with the manager."

Just as Seishin was leaving, Mitsuo poked his face into the separate building.

"Koike-san has arrived."

The elder Koike was, in spite of being in advanced age, slim but fit, with a good complexion, looking young for his age. He was the spitting image of hale and hearty.

"It's a terrible shame."

"Thank you for your hard work."

Koike knew the gist of things, conveying them as he sat in the office chair. "I'm at a loss for words that can comfort someone going through what Fuki-san is. It's a crime against one's parents to have them outlive you to do your funeral, they say."

Fanning his face with a folding fan, he downed the cup of barley tea brought by Mitsuo.

As many times as his father---and as many times as Seishin himself had done it, arranging a funeral service procedure was a simple matter. The wake would be today, the private funeral tomorrow, and as they were doing a burial, funeral services were kept short in the summer.

"Anyway, I'd like to ask if you could to do the chanting of the Sutras soon. And as long as the posthumous name is appropriate, that'll be good," said Koike, fanning the back of his neck. "It was so sudden, it's all a mess."

"Father is concerned about the arrangements in the cemetery."

"Ah," Koike nodded. "It seems Fuki-san made arrangements for herself just a while back. Since it's summer, we shouldn't delay the funeral services. The contractors were spoke to and put a rush job on it. I'd like to say it's a relief, but when you think of Fuki-san's feelings, well. I mean, burying your son in the grave you made arrangements for for yourself, and all."

"Yes, indeed," Seishin murmured.

"By the way," Koike said, his voice indicating a change in topic. "Junior Monk, you've met with Hidemasa from Yamairi recently haven't you?"

"Yamairi's----Mursako Hidemasa-san, is it? No, the last I had seen him was during the equinoctial week?"

"I was wondering if, at a time like this of all times, he was on a trip, or if maybe he said anything about going off somewhere--- Well, I guess even if he did, it wouldn't mean anything now. We're talking about back during equinoctial week."

"Is he not in?"

"Yeah. We can't reach him. I mean, Hidemasa-san is Fuki-san's older brother. We've been calling all morning but it seems no one is in. I can't imagine in my wildest dreams that he'd be out in the mountains," Koike said as he stood. "Anyway, we'll be counting on you."

"I will be as prompt as I am able."

"Sorry for the trouble. ---Ah, before I go, I'll pay the head monk a visit."

sinnesspiel

2

Seishin crossed the temple grounds, calling out to Mitsuo to take care of the temple in his stead. From the cemetery into the mountains thrust a path through the forest down the slope. It went through the sawmill lot across a ditch coming out at the bank. At the bank was a trodden route like a pathway that came to a dreary concrete building. Beyond the gate of branches in the hedges was the Ozaki Hospital back yard. It was a route he'd taken countless times since he was a child. In the country there were endless routes that weren't roads.

Crossing the back yard at his convenience, he opened the door he had been coming towards. At the service entryway staff used for coming and going was a step up into a small hallway and in that hall a glass sliding door cutting it off. He let himself in, arranging his shoes at the door just as the female nurse Ritsuko was passing by the other side of the partitioning door.

With a face that said 'Oh my', she was soon coming down the corridor to open the door.

"Good morning. Are you here for the doctor?"

"Yes. I'm sorry for coming during examination hours."

"Think nothing of it. Please come in." Ritsuko motioned to the examination room but Seishin refused.

"No, I'm dressed for duty, so here will be fine."

"Are you certain? Then, it will just be a minute if you could wait, please."

Ritsuko trotted briskly down the hall towards the examination room and returned promptly, gesturing behind her.

"He'll see you in the director's office---no, the waiting room, he says." Ritsuko giggled. "The doctor's face was practically saying 'I'm saved!'"

Somehow able to imagine that, Seishin smiled. Rumors of Shuuji's death were bound to be flying everywhere already. Patients probably took up more time gossiping than having their medical examinations---.

He bowed his head lightly and entered the waiting room. The former director's office was demolished when the addition was put on and was no longer there. In its place, a small closet was made out next to the examination rooms, which Toshio made into his own waiting room. Different from the former director, there was no special decor in the function-first, drab room. The guest's sofa belonged to the predecessor but it was always primed for napping with a pillow and blanket out over it, and the walls were packed with catalogues and such materials crammed in place. He knocked strictly as a formality before letting himself in, just as Toshio was entering from the examination room.

"A literal Buddha in Hell."

"Sorry about this."

"Right now I can see a halo glowing around your head. It's like I've been suffering penances for something one after another since this morning," Toshio said pushing the blanket aside and sitting on the sofa, stretching his feet out over the table. "The people that usually have no problem just coming in to pick up their meds from the pharmacy and going home today suddenly want a consultation. Then in the end, when you ask what they want to talk about, it's all about Gotouda."

Seishin smiled bitterly. Most of his patients were elderly, so there were all the more whose conditions were one step forward, one step back. Arthritis and lower back pain, skin diseases, high blood pressure and the like weren't the worst conditions to be inflicted

with but it was hard to call those who made up the majority of his patients healthy. Some of the patients who had been coming in for the longest time would only give word to the nurses before letting themselves into the treatment rooms, or would call up and demand a certain medication and that their family would be by to pick it up. Three years ago, when Toshio had inherited the hospital, he was eager to abolish such disorder but he immediately threw up both hands in defeat. He'd learned that in a village overrun by the elderly, if the patients didn't want to cooperate, the hospital couldn't do a thing about it.

Toshio stretched his body out over the sofa and looked up at Seishin. "And? After all, I'm sure you came about Shuuji-san too. I'll just be saying the same story to you too. ---On your way to do the bedside sutras?"

"Mm. Before that, I thought I would ask you about the state of things."

Toshio nodded. Toshio knew that it was a tradition Seishin was taking over from his father. There was no need to say what he was here to ask about or why.

"By the time I was called and hurried in by his mother, Shuuji-san was long gone. Livor mortis was showing and rigor mortis had set in. It's likely he died during the night. I got there a little before seven in the morning, I guess? I can at least say he didn't just die at dawn. It was probably something that happened late at night."

"What was the cause?"

Toshio's eyes widened as if he were utterly shocked that he was even being asked. "It's not like I was tending to him! Before that when he was laid up in bed, I didn't do any kind of medical examination, so how would I know what the cause of death was? The last time I examined Shuuji-san, he looked beyond healthy. ---Besides having to take off a toe nail from his big toe when he dropped something on his foot. And we're talking about half a year ago with that!"

As Seishin gave a bitter smile, there was a knock. The nurse

Ritsuko entered carrying a tray.

"Is he grumbling to you?" Ritsuko laughed with a wry smile, then scowled at Toshio. "Doctor, manners."

"This table is from today forward a footstool."

"Then, please move your feet off of the foot stool so that I may set the tea down," Ritsuko said lightly smacking Toshio's legs, putting the tea cups set aside on the low table into place.

"Good grief," Toshio stated, lowering his feet.

"Oh, Doctor. You're crabby, just because your patients won't leave you alone."

"I'm going cockeyed here. No matter where I look, it's nothing but old people pouring in. On top of that the old farts were lined up outside the entryway first thing in the morning! Thanks to that I've been dancing around with things to do non-stop. It's only the patients who actually need an examination who wait until it's beyond help to try coming in. In the first place," Toshio said thrusting his cup out towards Seishin. "It's not like the people who never seem to be bedridden are people who never get sick, they're the people who can hold out even when their condition's more or less crappy. They've got a good grip on themselves, so if it's just a cold, they'll let it heal while they work. They push through pain. When those kind of people are bedridden, it's something really keeping them in bed. Then the people around them figure since they're rarely laid up, it'll fix itself soon enough and wave it off, but they'll tend to the spoiled babies who'll go 'this hurts' or 'that's bad' all the time."

"That's an overstatement," Seishin said with a wry smile.

"Gotouda's Shuuji-san was like that. Even though the man was laid up three days before, his mother never called a doctor, didn't bring him to the hospital. Then in the end, she goes to try to wake him up and he's dead. He didn't have much of a fever, so she thought he had a light summer cold or heatstroke."

"I see...."

"With just asking what happened, I don't have a damn clue what the hell was wrong with him, what had him bedridden. No cough, no fever hot enough to notice, didn't seem like any place in particular was hurting. Still, his complexion was bad, he seemed like he was extremely worn out, and he didn't seem like he was eating, she said."

And with that in the end she made the decision not to have a doctor see him, Seishin thought casting his eyes down. Nobody wanted to think that someone in their family had a serious illness. They averted their eyes and wrapped it up it with the words 'it couldn't be', pretending that possibility didn't exist. By doing that, they determinedly keep it from floating to mind.

Toshio breathed a dejected sigh. "It's what they call sudden death. We won't know the cause of death without an autopsy, and even with an autopsy, if it was so-called sudden death, we won't know the reason. Besides, the Missus of the Gotoudas herself said no to an autopsy."

"Did you recommend something like that?"

"As a necessary formality. But, you can't just force the body away from a bereaved family. It wasn't an administrative autopsy or a legally ordered one after all. There's no choice when it gets like this. I used my last resort and went with 'acute heart failure' on the death certificate. It's like a trump card."

Seishin figured that Toshio was dissatisfied with that end result. When a villager came to the hospital, there was nothing to do but determine whether or not to send them to a larger hospital that could do a thorough investigation. They wanted someone to screen them to see whether they should tend to themselves at home or entrust themselves to a doctor's care. Patients not seeking that were seeking harmless medications, someone to listen to them complain, and that was it. Toshio had always resisted being put in that position but he didn't think there was really any way something like that could be fought.

"The one left behind is the one acting more like a patient. Well, I did let her cry out all her complaints."

Seishin nodded, glancing at his wristwatch. He had to go now. He grasped, at least, that to the family it was a sudden---a no doubt unreasonable death. It was hard to ask the details of a bereaved family stricken with grief. But without knowing the circumstances of the death, there was no telling what kind of careless things might be said. So, the Ozaki Hospital was asked about these matters in advance. The village only had one hospital. For the most part, no dead could be buried without first passing through Toshio's hands.

The village is surrounded by death.

---What was surrounded may have been Seishin as a monk, Toshio as a doctor.

sinnesspiel

3

The Gotouda home was in Kami-Sotoba. Kami-Sotoba ran parallel to the village road along the river bank, extending north, a complex mingling with the community of Monzen which stretched out at the southern region of the temple. While Gotouda's house was in the middle of Kami-Sotoba, far further north of that was the northern mountain the temple was on. It stood as if to whittle away the eastern bank.

"Somehow, he seemed so sluggish," Fuki said, wiping at the corner of her eye. "At first I wondered if it was heat stroke, that's what I said. He must have eaten something bad, I thought, and then he was bedridden. He wasn't ever one to get sick, so I let my guard down, and he himself said if he just slept, he'd get better... That was..."

Seishin watched helplessly, waiting in the corner of the tatami room as Fuki burst out crying, on her knees before her condolence caller. It was tragic when a child lost a parent but when a parent lost a child something about it seemed wrong, he thought of it as all the more of a tragedy.

"I should have had a doctor examine him!" Fuki cried out. "Even if Shuuji was against it, I should have had the Junior Doctor come!"

The old man Koike patted Fuki's back. Of those gathered to help, the old women gathered around Fuki seemed to have found her crying contagious. In the tatami room, separated off, were those watching Fuki, their eyes filled with pity.

"But Shuuji-kun was always so healthy."

"They say the healthier a person is, the more sudden their death is."

"The people around him and he himself, nobody thought much of it."

And then, hearing voices of another group, Seishin faintly knitted his brows.

"...a surprise, a gated wall with such an elegant roof."

"Something like that was built? By who?"

"I just said, by the Maebara's Obaa-chan."

"But that woman doesn't have anyone to even pass it on to."

"That's right. Living on a pension like she is, spending so much money, what does she think she's doing?"

"Oh, but doesn't that woman have mountains of money?"

"Mountains you say, but isn't it on the Yamairi, Mountain Entrance, village road? Even if it's dirt cheap, there certainly won't be any buyers!"

Seishin breathed a low sigh. The village was small. Extended family, meet ups, youth groups, and all sorts of organizations made a complicated web of interpersonal relationships. That said, it didn't mean that all relationships would necessarily be deep ones. Even if there was enough of a connection to hurry to a funeral service, they didn't necessarily care enough for the dead to mourn them; there were countless such relationships throughout the village.

"I'm so sorry," a small voice said. Seishin turned back. An old woman who had come to help refilled Seishin's tea cup. "If you could please continue waiting a little longer, until the guests stop coming in."

With a nod, Seishin exhaled lightly. In such a scene as this, he had to keep a cool, refined expression---.

Death wasn't a rare thing for the village. There were many elderly in the village or rather, many deaths. To the villagers, a senior's death was no tragedy. It was an unavoidable part of man's work; the elderly had finished the pilgrimage called life and returned to the mountains. Those born in the village fulfilled their works as man and soon returned off to the mount.

But, Shuuji had not finished his work. From time to time in the village, there was something unusual that happened. For the one who had passed on and for the ones left behind, it was sheer tragedy, but the dead would at times, unable to wait for a person's homecoming, appear from out of the fir trees and carry someone off. Shuuji was carried off by such demons.

--A Shiki.

As Seishin sat silent with his thoughts, the manager old man Koike spoke, telling him to go on. Seishin moved to Shuuji's bedside to read the sutras.

Seishin finished chanting the sutras and Shuuji's body was placed in the coffin. Seeing that for the moment, there was nobody at Fuki's side, Seishin approached her.

"Then for now I will depart. Please accept my deepest condolences. He will be dearly missed."

Fuki nodded. The retired former head monk was also a gentle man but his son was even more of a gentle, soft spoken one. In an instant she was seized by an urge to spit out everything.

(It's not as if I didn't pay attention!)

There was no way she could not be worried about her bedridden son. She thought about calling the doctor, she thought about it so many times. She was only afraid, what if calling the doctor lead to something even worse than not calling him? It was because she was worried about her son.

(The blood in his futon...)

Fuki looked up at Seishin, and then in one motion returned her gaze to the string of Juzu prayer beads in her lap.

(It's all over now.)

It was far too late to be asking what had happened to Shuuji now.

"Thank you very much. ...I will be depending on you again this evening as well."

That was all that Fuki said. Seishin nodded.

"It is a troubling time but please do take care of yourself. It is painful for us to lose Shuuji-san but, if Fuki-san were to similarly fall ill, please know that there would be many similarly hurt for your sake."
Fuki nodded.
(But, there was blood in my boy's futon...)
Giving his greetings to the people gathered as he sought out Koike, Seishin found him in the living room talking on the phone.
"Koike-san, I will be taking my leave."
At Seishin's voice, with the receiver silent at his ear, Koike nodded back at him:
"Aa. Thank you for today. We'll be counting on you for the wake as well," he said to Seishin, hanging up the receiver and then mumbling to himself. "....Where did he go off to?"
"The Murasako's Hidemasa-san, you mean?"
To Seishin's question, old man Koike gave a perplexed nod. "I'd think he'd either have to be in the fields or in the mountains but. --- That's right, Junior Monk, you know Hidemasa-san's and that mountain area, don't you?"
"I believe I do. It is near the graveyard. If you'd like, should I go out there? I do not have any other plans for a while today, either way."
A relieved half-smile rose over old man Koike's face. "If you don't mind me asking. It's a sorry shame to have to ask this much of you but. At any rate, there's nobody who knows both Hidemasa-san and those mountains. If we looked I'm sure we'd find someone who knew them but, we've got to get to digging that grave in a bit here."
"I'll go. If I try looking in the mountains and am not able to find him, I will leave a note at his house."
Seishin departed from the Gotouda house and returned briefly to the temple to tell Mitsuo the situation. He changed into western style clothes more appropriate for entering the mountains and left the temple.
Driving along the private road beside the belfry, he came to the bottom of stone steps before the mountain gate. At the bottom of the stone steps was a short, steep hill road with traditional stone paving which continued for about two hundred meters, all sculpting a backdrop of a town once built around the temple. The old general store where candles and incense were, the flower shop in the grotto, and the assorted Buddhist altar equipment which included the sotoba and coffins used in the village were akin the three treasures

of Buddhism: the Buddha, the sutras and the priesthood. The shrine's Otabisho's in this once very small temple town was a remnant of the time when the temple and the shrine were one entity.
The car drove on slowly, shop keeps and others coming out the front to see him. He saw in the rear view mirror as they bowed their heads, seeing him off.
There was a seemingly endless flow of people walking past the turn at the Otabisho onto the asphalt road, likely going towards Gotouda's house. Most were walking the village road along the riverbank. Of each and every person he passed, they all turned when they noticed the car approaching, bowing their heads to him as they realized it was Seishin at the wheel.
---That, there, was Seishin's burden.

sinnesspiel

4

"Ah, it's the Junior Monk." Mutou saw off the passing white sedan. "He was out of uniform. The bedside sutras are already over."

Yuuki stared in befuddlement as Mutou murmured.

Mutou had come a calling to him that morning, saying that there was a burial. Villagers came to help out when there were funeral services. It seemed there was an organization called the Mourning Crew made for those in the neighborhoods to help each other out. He knew there was an organization like that but until then Yuuki had never been a part of that Mourning Crew. It was the first time he'd been invited like this, at those words "You coming?" he sensed deep in his heart as he set out that at last he, too, was being entered into the village's society of neighborly graces.

Yet all the same, being lead out of the home by Mutou who had invited him, the surroundings utterly lacked the air of a funeral, and Mutou was headed through Naka-Sotoba to Kami-Sotoba. Yuuki followed after quietly, certain that the services must have been at the temple, yet there they were heading not to the temple, but Kami-Sotoba. Wasn't it a key point that there was a neighborhood association style system in place? Then why must they go to the far and away Kami-Sotoba? Yuuki couldn't make sense of it.

"Mutou-san," Yuuki came to a stop and called to Mutou. "We've come to Kami-Sotoba. Aren't we heading to the temple?"

"We're going to Gotouda's house. We're the Mourning Crew."

"So why---" Just as Yuuki was about to try to ask just what this Mourning Crew was to do, he saw a man coming up from the paths

between the rice fields. "Hirosawa-san!"

"Ah, hello," Hirosawa said with his usual gentle smile. "Is that right, Mutou-san and Yuuki-san are also a part of this Mourning Crew?"

"Saying it like that means Hirosawa-san is, too?" Yuuki blinked. This was another thing he couldn't grasp. Yuuki and Mutou were from Naka-Sotoba's third squad, and while he didn't know which squad number Hirosawa was a part of, at the very least he knew he wasn't from squad three. And why were they meeting up at a funeral in Kami-Sotoba?

Hirosawa must have noticed the perplexed look on Yuuki's face, smiling as he rose up to the same level of the road from the fields. "I'm in the same Mourning Crew. Naka-Sotoba Third."

"But…"

"I live in the sixth squad though. However, as the Mourning Crew and the squads are separate things..."

Haa, Yuuki gave with a vague nod.

"Yuuki-san is in the third squad of Naka-Sotoba. I am the sixth squad. That's an administrative division. Sotoba has administrative distinctions, district divisions, with Sotoba itself split into six districts. Each named community is a district. These are further separated into squads, based on where your house is located."

"The Mourning Crew isn't like that?"

"Correct. This is because the village has head families and branch families. The Mourning Crew is fundamentally based on squads but there's also the connection between the branch families not located where the head family is. Auspicious and inauspicious occasions ultimately can't exist separate from consanguinity."

"Ah, is that how it is? Be it auspicious or inauspicious, in the end, those with blood ties will be there either way."

"That's how it is, yes? In the past---until my father's time, there was what was called a Celebratory Crew who got together to offer congratulations but nowadays there aren't any who have weddings in the main family's tatami room, anymore."

"Were the Celebratory Crew and the Mourning Crew the same thing?"

"There is a subtle distinction. The Mourning Crew is in the temple's dominion, but the Celebratory Crew is in the shrine's dominion. The Mourning Crew's management was heavily tied to the temple parishioner's organizations, and the Celebratory Crew was heavily tied to the village's official shrine parish organization. So, though they were the same houses, the Mourning Crew and the Celebratory Crew had a few different members."

"I see," interrupted Mutou. "You didn't get that, so that's why you've been tilting your head like you were confused for a while now."

Yuuki forced a smile. "Right. I was thinking 'what, this is the way to Kami-Sotoba isn't it?' But I see, blood ties, is it."

"That is what it comes down to. I live in the sixth squad but my main family is in the third squad, so I'm affiliated with the Naka-Sotoba's Mourning Crew's third division. Gotouda is the same. Her house is in Kami-Sotoba but her Mourning Crew is the Naka-Sotoba third division."

"I see. Speaking of Hirosawa, they're next to my house. That must be your main family's place, then."

Hirosawa smiled. "It isn't the house next to yours; it's the furthest south in the third squad. They're also Hirosawas, they're the main branch. The Hirosawas that are your neighbors may have long ago been related to ours but as for the present, there is no connection."

"Ah, come to think of it, there were Hirosawas down there too, huh---Now that I think of it, there are a lot of Hirosawa households, aren't there?"

Indeed, Hirosawa nodded.

"There are four distinct family lines in the village. Takemura, Tamo, Yasumori and Murasako are the four houses. Those four appear to have been the families that established the village. There are some who add the Hirosawas and count it as five families, as well. That's how many Hirosawas there are. Lately the Tamo and Murasakos are dwindling too, so I wonder... There may in fact be more Hirosawas, after all. "

Yuuki's eyes widened. "The village was established in-----"

"It seems to have been in the early days of the Edo period."

"Were they here that long? The four families, too? And they're still carrying on right here to this day?"

For someone born and raised in the city like Yuuki that was at least a bit shocking. Yuuki himself was born in the city but his father was from Touhoku in northern Honshu and his mother was from the Toukai regions in mid-southern Honshu. And you couldn't say they had taken root anywhere; in fact he didn't have any idea where his grandparents' parents' generation may have been or come from.

"Seems to be the case. As for the temple being built, that was about a hundred years after the fact but, by the time the temple was built, the four families and the Hirosawas were already in place. Of course, back then they didn't quite have last names, but."

"That is amazing," Yuuki said with a breath half full of wonder. "That must be what they mean by taking root someplace."

Hirosawa smiled. Looking at it from Yuuki's viewpoint, that was seen as the smile, the composure of one who was firm, resolute from having taken root someplace.

sinnesspiel

5

"Ah, it's the Junior Monk." Mutou saw off the passing white sedan. "He was out of uniform. The bedside sutras are already over."

Yuuki stared in befuddlement as Mutou murmured.

Mutou had come a calling to him that morning, saying that there was a burial. Villagers came to help out when there were funeral services. It seemed there was an organization called the Mourning Crew made for those in the neighborhoods to help each other out. He knew there was an organization like that but until then Yuuki had never been a part of that Mourning Crew. It was the first time he'd been invited like this, at those words "You coming?" he sensed deep in his heart as he set out that at last he, too, was being entered into the village's society of neighborly graces.

Yet all the same, being lead out of the home by Mutou who had invited him, the surroundings utterly lacked the air of a funeral, and Mutou was headed through Naka-Sotoba to Kami-Sotoba. Yuuki followed after quietly, certain that the services must have been at the temple, yet there they were heading not to the temple, but Kami-Sotoba. Wasn't it a key point that there was a neighborhood association style system in place? Then why must they go to the far and away Kami-Sotoba? Yuuki couldn't make sense of it.

"Mutou-san," Yuuki came to a stop and called to Mutou. "We've come to Kami-Sotoba. Aren't we heading to the temple?"

"We're going to Gotouda's house. We're the Mourning Crew."

"So why---" Just as Yuuki was about to try to ask just what this Mourning Crew was to do, he saw a man coming up from the paths

between the rice fields. "Hirosawa-san!"

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5

Seishin headed north along the road at the riverbank. Passing through Kami-Sotoba which he had just left shortly before, the car

drove on towards Yamairi. Once out of Kami-Sotoba, the shoulders of the road faded, making the road all the more narrow. The road was detoured, curving around the base of the northern mountain that housed the temple. It became a gently rising roadway.

On one side of the road was a dense forest of firs, drawing up all the way to the point where the mountain was shaved away to level the road. The retaining wall that held the structure up was made of old raw ore from the river, covered in moss and ferns. On the opposite side of that structure was the roadside row of firs, and beyond it flowed the mountain stream. However, this point was rather high up on the river canyon, so the surface of the water couldn't be seen from here. That mountain stream became thinner bit by bit until it was at last separated from the road. At that point, there was little to see to be called a road, the space between the trees minimal enough that two cars could collide in passing. There was nothing to serve as a guard rail nor was there a center line.

The firs locked in all fields of view, only the trunks cutting through the monotony of green. Just around the curve was an interruption in the forest, a valley---no, not a valley, a community, opened within a basin between mountain. Along the detour around the northern mountain to its northern face, there it was. That was Yamairi.

The road met the woodland path, becoming thinner still, leading up towards the neighborhood. The slim hill road was a separation between rice fields, dotted with houses. In the past the community was the point of entry into the mountains but as forestry declined, so too did the population, down to two households, with only three people living there.

Yamairi was quiet as if sleeping. Only the voices of the cicadas and a faint breeze came in through the open car window. It had always been a quiet place but Seishin felt as if he'd lost his way in an abandoned house. The day when it would at last be truly abandoned may not have been far off. The married Murasako Hidemasa and Mieko and Ohkawa Gigorou were advanced in age, to the point where it wouldn't be unheard of for something to happen to them.

How much longer will there be a Yamairi to come to, Seishin wondered as he surveyed the community. The hill road weaved between two slopes, continuing on narrowly beyond the curve. There were around ten homes visible but of them most were dilapidated, only two of the buildings having any inhabitants. Amongst the houses abandoned long ago were buildings with their roofs warped and caving in. A house without a master was quick to fall to ruin. In one of the lower six communities, a house like that would find a buyer if only out of idle curiosity but likely not so in Yamairi. ----The neighborhood was to be swallowed up by the firs.

It was as he was thinking such a thought that his eyes stopped over one particular house. Over the closed storm shutter was a fresh plank of wood hammered into place. While giving a thought to its peculiarity, Seishin went on past that, displaying some skill in driving up to a certain house. If they weren't answering the phone, they must have been in the mountains but for prudence's sake he entered the Murasako property.

Each of the houses in Yamairi were quite tall. Whittling into the mountain, houses were built of packed stone walls. They were surely constructed in tandem with that road that entered and left the mountains. He stopped on that slope and for the time being headed for the entryway. While lingering on how to convey the news of the deceased, he called out as he opened the entryway. As he pulled the sliding storm door facing the front yard half open, he recalled how strange it was for a front door to be closed in this summer's midday heat, when an offensive smell took hold of him in that entryway. It was the smell of something or another rotting. A bad feeling struck him.

"Murasako-san?" Seishin called out one more time but there was no answer. Disturbed, he left the entryway, further into the house itself to look about. "Murasako-san, are you in?"

Something clawed at his senses as Seishin called out into the house. Only adding to that premonition was the fact that there was no response from anywhere within. No face poked out from the back, nobody came out from the outhouse. All of the front windows had been closed, the curtains tightly drawn. In the village, even when going into the mountains or the fields, people did not lock

their doors. Moreover when it was summer. Not wanting the hot air to stagnate, houses were left open for the breeze.

Ohkawa Gigorou may know something, he thought as he went to the back of the house for good measure. He found the kitchen door and tried opening it.

"Murasako-sa---" Mid-word, Seishin suddenly cut off. The instant the door was opened, the smell came barreling out as if bludgeoning him in the face.

On the concrete spread beneath the clay floor, shoes were scattered, dark red stains spreading, splotching out. Above the stain flies swarmed, rising to a spiral as if surprised by the wind before returning to the stain.

(.....Blood?)

That looked like a bloodstain. Seishin held his breath lightly, timidly peering in.

There was a rather large step up from the doorway and another one up into the kitchen. There was a small table set, a dinning-kitchen style set up but one chair was toppled, diagonal, as if pushed away from the table by somebody. The vinyl tablecloth was half off, the odds and ends on the table fallen and scattered. With the floor littered with things thrown down over it, it left the impression of terrible chaos. Seishin thought it had looked as if a child had just finished playing but what were scattered about were not toys.

That was when he saw pelt of fur, off of a dog or something else. Scattered over the cleaned portions of the floor were splotches of black-red dying every which way. And, that vehement smell.

"This is..." As the words slipped out, he covered his mouth and nose with his sleeve without thinking. The smell of rot streamed into the back of his throat, as if to choke him into a coughing fit. That feeling was now accompanied by nausea. That relatively large pelt looked like it was torn from the body of a dog or something, or perhaps like a foot. It could have been the foot from a small brown

rabbit but it was tumbled in the entryway. Here and everywhere about it, insects gushing, a tightly packed crowd of flies.

"Murasako-san, hello...?!"

He shouted out but all that came of it were the flies jumping. Seishin retreated. He knew himself how pale he had become.

Something happened. If not, there was no way that they would leave things in that state, was there? How many were there? It was impossible to tell with only one look. There was no way to tell what they were originally. There were probably several if not more animals whose bodies had been torn to bits and left to rot.

What came to mind first was wild dogs. The only time bears were heard about in Sotoba were in folklore or other fake stories told by the elderly. It seemed there were rumors that dogs had gotten lost in the woods forming a great number of wild dogs, but setting whether there were enough to properly call a great number or not aside, there were many who had seen dogs in the mountains, many who had heard them crying.

Seishin remembered the dilapidated house he'd passed. It had the sliding storm door boarded over. Could not the wild dogs have been nesting in the abandoned house? And then those wild dogs intruded even into the homes where people were living and---.

(Intruding, and then?) A tremble shot through him from the soles of his feet. (A dog could lay waste to a young man in a house. ....There'd be nobody there to stop it.)

"---It can't be." Saying it to himself, Seishin looked over his surroundings. Finding a broom toppled over in the garden by the doorway, he picked it up. Now armed, he headed towards the back yard. A wild beast could come charging, so he kept his guard up, changing the position of the broom in his hands countless times.

While calling out "Murasako-san!" time and time again, he came to the back yard, piled with useless heaps. Drawing near to the back of the house, a narrow garden sat between the building and a cliff, largely unreached by the sun's rays. He spied the sliding glass doors

on the garden veranda, narrowly opened.

Seishin peered in through the half opened door. The sliding shouji door inside the glass he peered through was just faintly opened from the right hand side. He opened the glass until he could see in, an unobstructed view of a pair of eyes gazing straight up at him.

The one splayed out in the room appeared to be peeking out through the shouji with vacant, open eyes. The cloudiness of those eyes did not go unnoticed by Seishin. Unblinking, and face discolored with black and blue, the muscles moving not an inch. And---that rotting smell.

Shouting "Murasako-san!" as he peered at that face from beyond the shouji, he could recognize it as Mieko. Behind Mieko's stretched out form could be seen a Buddhist family altar, and before it were spread two futons. On one of them, the summer bedding was rolled up at the foot end. In the other there appeared to be a person lying but at that beside swarmed a pillar of flies, gathering, swirling, engulfing.

Over the tatami leaked a sickly, tawny liquid from the futon with someone still inside. He knew that somebody was lying in that futon but who that was he did not know. The bedding formed an ovular lump, a disgusting color as if melting with what was beneath it. Above the tatami were splotched, smeared stains, and above them countless flies stopping on and flying about.

As Seishin gaped at the sight before him in a daze, a fly came to a stop on Mieko's open eye ball.

He leaped back. His voice wouldn't come, much less in a scream. He by no means had the mind to step inside, rather, Seishin forced his legs to pump through the feeling of having had his insides drawn out, rushing to the front yard.

The front of the house was, in a somehow satirical way, bathed in rays of sunlight.

The sun was strong, reflecting white rays off of the concrete

spread over the slope, between deep black crevices. The land and the concrete were both so bright it stung the eyes.

(What a sight)

Seishin quickly left the yard, going to higher grounds, towards Ohkawa Gigorou's house. Feeling too impatient to get in, turn the key, and drive, he was in no state to use the car.

There was no sound nor presence throughout the neighborhood. The voices of the cicadas filled the emptiness, as if closing in. The sunlight reflected off of the asphalt and the stone wall just a ways ahead along the narrow road, an intricate reflection, a mirage as if the air itself were radiating light.

He stormed the dried grounds, shouting as he ran up to the front porch, the porch where Seishin smelt that atrocious, rotting smell. Unlike the Murasako home, Gigorou's house's storm door was left open, the shouji pulled back, a cool breeze flowing into the clearly visibly, unmanned living room. Nevertheless, as if the inside of the house were faintly echoing the clamor outside, that awful mephitis was stagnant.

"Ohkawa-san, Gigorou-san!" Seishin called out, but there was no answer. Even if nerves had drawn his voice higher pitched, the monk's voice carried well. Nevertheless, no matter how many times he called out there was, of course, no answer, no sign nor hint of anyone moving. Slightly hesitant, Seishin stepped up into the living room. As soon as he stepped in, there was a telephone rack.

(Two, possibly three people.)

And, Yamairi only had three people. ---Yes, if by chance Gigorou was safe, he would have peeked in on the Murasako household when they'd gone unseen. If he had done so, he couldn't have missed that disastrous scene, he couldn't have failed to contact somebody about it.

Seishin grasped the phone receiver. His own hand trembled violently with his realization.

He looked upwards to regain control of his breathing, the scene outside staggering him. The neighborhood baking in the sun. It was originally mostly empty houses, but it had immediately become entirely empty houses. The stone walls, the gardens, the roads, everything here had lost all meaning. The dying community had truly died. ---Yamairi would be swallowed up by the firs.

The voices of the cicadas in the mountains were thunderous. The voices of the birds mingled with them. Outside of the houses, sunlight radiated, the firs were green, and the clear blue sky was serenely stretched above the mountaintops.

sinnesspiel

6

"I'm back."

Ritsuko looked up from the magazine as that voice called out. Looking in the open break room doorway, Toshio had just returned through the back door, examination bag in hand. By Saturday afternoon, the only one left was Ritsuko who volunteered to house-sit.

"Welcome back," Ritsuko said, entering the waiting room where Toshio stood. "How was Shou-kun?"

"Mild case of heatstroke."

"Oh dear."

Toshio didn't mind house calls. If he was called, he'd grab his bag and head out, carefree. Even if he wasn't specifically called out, he'd go out to take care of some business like today, seeing if the kids were well, consulting on whether it'd be better to bring them in or not. If it was far, he'd take the car, if it was nearby he'd walk, or requisition one of the nurse's bicycles, as even if it was close, summers were hot. Even now he was soaked in sweat.

"The heat is just terrible isn't it, this year." Ritsuko turned up the air conditioning. "Would you like something cold to drink?"

"A beer," Toshio said wearily, throwing down his bag.

"Yes, yes. A dark brew with no foam, yes?"

"When I say beer, I mean beer."

Smiling at the ever obstinate Toshio, Ritsuko stepped out of the room. She went to the tea room and poured cold barley tea into a glass. While she was at it, she took a small cup of sherbet from the fridge and a spoon. When she brought them back to the waiting room, Toshio was in front of the cooler vent, letting the breeze blow down his collar.

"A snack with your drink."

"Now that's service."

Setting the glass and cup on the table and watching Toshio sit, Ritsuko held the tray to her chest. "A bit ago, the Maebara's Obaa-chan had come by. Maebara Setsu-san. She was out of medicine and said to give her more."

Toshio peeled the top off of the sherbet and thrust the spoon in. "The Maebara's Setsu-san---she's on thyradin for her Hashimoto's disease, wasn't it?"

"Yes. That condition doesn't seem to be going well. It seems she didn't feel it was working, so she decided to take more of it."

"How stupid. Setsu-san is prone to heart attacks. That is the dumbest idea, that right there."

"I explained as much to her but she said she was out of medicine either way, so to give it to her."

"Old people get like that. They get to thinking they can just make medicine more effective by taking more of it."

"I had told her that I would not dispense medications without the doctor's orders and to please wait for you to return but she wouldn't listen. There was no choice, I did as her last prescription said and dispersed only two days' worth. I wouldn't give any more medicine than that, so I sent her off to return on Monday."

"That old woman hates needles, so she tries to miss me. She knows if she has an exam there'll be a blood test with it."

"I hope that she comes to her appointment properly, though. If

she doesn't, I don't know what we'll do."

"Mix it with some methimazole on her."

"Doctor."

Ritsuko sighed.

"What's wrong? If we have a hormone and an anti-hormone, the balance sheet checks out, doesn't it?"

"That is not the problem."

Ritsuko looked up to the ceiling, realizing there was no treatment for him. That was when the phone rang. When Ritsuko moved to answer, Toshio, spoon held in his mouth, raised a hand. "Ah, it's fine. I got it. Go on home."

As he had said as much and she had seen him pick up the receiver, Ritsuko bowed her head indicating her intent to leave. Toshio nodded in his own answer of a gesture, then, suddenly, his voice rose with a "What?" Ritsuko stopped in her tracks without thinking, watching Toshio's suddenly grim expression.

"All of them? Really? ---The police."

At the word 'police' she startled, still clutching the tray as she took a long, hard look at Toshio's face. She subconsciously strained her ears, but she couldn't hear the voice on the other end.

"It needs to be reported. No, it's fine, I'll call them from here. --- Yeah, don't, definitely don't move them. Don't touch anything, just wait outside, all right?"

Somebody must have collapsed. Ritsuko tensed slightly.

"So, you haven't confirmed Gigorou-Jii-san's body's dead, huh?"

Ritsuko's brows knit together. Gigorou---was that Yamairi's Ohkawa Gigorou?

"Confirm it. The hell's a monk getting wound up over a corpse? If

he is breathing, a doctor'll be there. You're sure about Murasako-san at least, right? --- No, it's fine. Anyway, I'm coming, so wait there. In the meantime, check out Gigorou-jii-san, if he's breathing call an ambulance. I'll be right there."

Talking fast, Toshio hung up the phone, looking at Ritsuko who stood there. He kept it short.

"A catastrophe in Yamairi."

sinnesspiel

7

"Aren't we lucky, Shigeki-kun! It was nothing!"

At the sound of Yano Kanami's voice, Maeda Motoko turned from the window table with a smile. "When I first heard, it was like my insides froze to ice, though. He hasn't had a hint of a fever or any nightmares at night either, so it looks like it really was nothing. How embarrassing, I was such a mess..."

Kanami smiled from the counter. "When it comes to their children, that's what mothers do."

Kanami, the one speaking of children and mothers, left her children with the other party in the divorce. She didn't say much, but Motoko thought: wasn't it as if her children were taken away by her partner?

"I was inexcusable to the Junior Monk. I wonder if I shouldn't go to offer an apology?"

"It'll be all right won't it? I won't stop you from going to speak your gratitude but he's not that hard of a person. He has a gentle temperament, our Junior Monk. Even when you were going at him as if to bite his head off, he didn't seem to have any hard feelings towards you."

She murmured her relief, setting the tableware atop the table when she heard a patrol car siren. She looked up with a start, eyes going to the national highway beyond the wide pane of glass.

From the counter Kanami strained her ears. Kanami's drive-in faced the entrance to the village, and from the counter you could

see the national highway that lead towards the town of Mizobe. In the distance, passing beneath the expressway overpass, a patrol car could be seen drawing closer. She knew that Motoko at the window would be stiffening.

"It's all right, Motoko."

She smiled, conveying to Motoko that it surely had nothing to do with Sotoba. Motoko returned a clumsy smile, gathering the utensils on the tray and moved back to the counter but when the car passed by the window and from there took the turn towards the village road along the riverbank, she was surprised.

(Did something happen? ---But, what?)

Motoko let out a small wail. Kanami clapped her hand over that. "It isn't Shigeki-kun. There's nothing to worry about. ---But, I do wonder if something did happen?"

(Is it an accident?)

Of course it went without saying that she hoped it wasn't Motoko's child, on the one-in-a-million chance. So Kanami thought, giving her friend a deliberate pat on the arm. With an uneasiness she couldn't place, they watched the two patrol cars and the paddy-wagon grey van drive on.

At just that moment, at the Takemura Stationary Shop just a little ways north of the Drive-in, the old folks were gathered about the shop front. The elderly were at their usual stools exchanging idle gossip when suddenly the siren blared, the sight of the patrol car racing through causing them to stand at once.

"What's this, an accident, ey?"

Oitarou stood and saw the passing patrol car leave. Keeping watch for its destination, he confirmed that it was headed straight along the riverbank village road. "It's going up. Wonder if something happened, in Kami-Sotoba or maybe Monzen."

"It was probably some accident, I'm sure." Yaeko said, causing Takeko to give a nasal snort.

"I'll bet it's Ohkawa's brat." The Ohkawa Liquor Shop's boy was one they all turned their noses up at. He'd been a bad-tempered hooligan for a long time, and even the way he drove the delivery motorbike was wild. "Perhaps he's run himself into something. I'd always knew it would happen one day."

Takemura Tatsu had no particular words to interject. At most, she wondered, 'would that patrol cars be coming out just for an accident?' but it wasn't a thought worth sharing. Soon enough someone would probably come by to tell them about what happened.

Gotouda Fuki came out of the house, walking with Yano Tae's support, into the police car. There was a call. The manager was the one who picked up. Holding the receiver, the funeral manager went pale, then announced to Fuki her own brother's death.

Since hearing it, Fuki's arms had been covered in goose bumps, ones that didn't fade even in the mid-day summer heat. Bystanders pat her hand seeking to offer her some comfort but none of it warmed her. How her brother died, the manager did not say and so Fuki did not know. She didn't couldn't help thinking that that was because the funeral manager was hiding it. She heard the sound of the patrol car. If the police were called, then there was no mistaking that it was an unnatural death. That sent goose bumps down her spine.

Yano Tae clung to the car.

"Fuki-san, it'd be better to leave it to somebody else! It's hard on you with your age!"

Looking up at the already tearful face of her longtime friend, Fuki remained her seat, fist a hard curl in her lap. The funeral manager seated next to her reached out to hold that hand, but it lacked a sense of visceral reality.

"It's all right.... he's, my brother, after all." As she spoke, she realized how much she was shaking. Her gaze was on Tae, but every nerve in her body was attuned to the police officer in the seat in front of her, and she knew it.

(If I don't calm down...)

The more she tried to clench her fist firmly, the more terribly they shook.

(If they see this, they'll think it's strange....)

"But, Fuki-san."

"....It's all right."

The officer sat wordlessly. She couldn't help thinking he was listening intently. Fuki put on no brave fronts, bowing her head low. At the same time, she closed the door and the car started moving. Fuki couldn't lift her head.

"There was a death, wasn't there? Your son, wasn't it?

When the voice came from the front, she seemed to jump in her seat. She nervously lifted her face, turning her head to look at the middle aged officer in the passenger's seat; his eyes were boring into Fuki.

"Yes,.... Yes, sir. My youngest son."

(Blood was...)

"My condolences, ma'am. That's a real shame. ---How old was he?"

"He was 39."

"Then, where are his wife or your grandchildren?"

"No, he was still single, so."

(Blood was.... his clothes...)

Fuki shook her head. "Is that so," said the officer, holding his tongue after that. From there, an eternity passed. Every hint of sound terrified her. Every time the officer took a breath, she felt he was on the verge of questioning her.

(Had your son gone to Yamairi recently?)

(Was your son acting unusual in any way after he returned?)

(Did he have blood on his clothing or anything like----)

But the officer had nothing more to say, the car didn't seem to be to bring Fuki anywhere for questioning, going to the family home in Yamairi. The officer stepped out of the car, as did Fuki with the funeral manager's support, when two sharp eyed men came up. This time for certain she'd be questioned, she thought, prepared. Prepared though she was, she was still surprised to be brought to her brother's house for questioning.

"Uhm, are you the family?"

"Where are Hidemasa-san and Mieko-san's children? Do you have their contact information?"

"Yes.... They have two. Both have moved a long ways out, but if you'd like their contact information, then at my house, I...."

The two men who seemed to be detectives nodded and took notes. They asked several more questions but nothing in particular regarding blood splotches came out. Relief washed over and wore her out. They brought her to the living room to sit and asked if anything seemed to be missing but still nothing about any blood stains. That he'd met with Mieko, that he'd gone to Yamairi to pay a get-well visit to Hidemasa, and that he'd returned with blood on his clothing never did come out in the open.

sinnesspiel

8

Seishin looked up at the community warmed by the sun's rays from the shade of the fir trees.

The resonance of the cicadas' chirps echoed along the slope of the mountain. Two-toned colored cars were stopped here and there on the street by the Murasako family home. Like on TV or a movie, Seishin thought. The sight of those cars and the investigators was dreadful, enough to disconnect from one's sense of reality.

The first to rush on scene was the resident officer, Takami, and as he explained the situation to Takami, pointing out the various calamities, the prefectural police arrived. He did the same with them, going back over the incident and story, leading along the paths he took and giving the explanations again but once that was over, there was nothing left for him to do. He couldn't get used to it---feeling constrained with so many people flowing into the place, though he had no particular destination, he walked the roads of Yamairi. Just maybe, he thought, he had the feeling, that this could be for the last time.

Even in the abandoned houses near the Murasako household, there was the sight of officers looking at the porches and in the houses themselves. So he trudged down the road to Yamairi's entrance, sitting at the three-pronged road, watching over the neighborhood's manner of demise. Recognizing that Yamairi was dead, the clamor before his eyes would seem contrary but it bore resemblance to the service for Shuuji that he had just been at. --- Evidently, this was what a funeral service for a neighborhood looked like.

The road up from the village, from where Seishin was sitting just

then, turned left to enter the neighborhood of Yamairi. To the right was a rather wide, empty space, and deep into that emptiness the village road continued on to the right. It was a mountain road that was pushing it to be as wide as even one truck but two lines of track marks continuing on the earth showed that the village road was still just barely alive.

The distinct tread-marks on the earth discolored by the blazing sun contrasted the summer grass, for an all the more summer like complexion. There must have been a spring in the far corner of the vacant lot as before a small hokora were muddied tracks in every direction, brightly colored butterflies gathered about seeking water. The hokora was so small it was merely an enclosure with a roof, storing a stone pillar and a sacred Jizo, but the latter was toppled, broken with the Jizo's head having rolled aside the mud tracks. Its red apron was last year's (and it was probably Mieko who had put it on him) or so. It was a lonely, faded color. The injured and exposed Jizo's head was surrounded by dragon flies, their wings gleaming like glass.

A neighborhood that had died out and the clamor of living beings, the voices of the cicadas and the birds, the vivid colors of summer and its vitality, intermingled there with death and ruin. Yamairi now could be thought of as being over-saturated in things until it would snap apart.

Becoming unable to bear looking at it, he sighed and rose. He climbed the hill being warmed by the sun and its reflections, walking without purpose along the road towards Gigorou's house. ---He'd thought about how he'd lost his head, if he did say so himself.

He lowered himself onto the stone steps down from the Ohkawa house's estates, sitting facing straight ahead to the Murasako house, idly seeing the patrol car stopped at the Murasako household, and beside it Fuki and two investigators talking.

"----Yo."

A voice called out to him from behind; he turned as Toshio came down the steps towards him. He looked towards the Murasako

house with eyes narrowed against the glare, holding onto the railing of the steps and stopping in the shadow of a fig tree to light a cigarette.

"What a catastrophe, huh?"

Seishin subconsciously pursed his lips. From Gigorou's house, he immediately contacted Toshio. Per instructions, he'd searched for Gigorou but, without thinking he found himself wanting to blame Toshio for the state he found the old man in.

"I see Fuki-san is here. ...Is she all right?"

"With what?"

"The body... she identified it, right?" Seishin started to say, with a gurgling noise in the back of his throat. Unfortunately, he had nothing left to puke up.

Toshio shrugged.

"If it's that, I already took care of it. Old lady Murasako aside, the two old guys don't look like anything besides two old bodies. They'll probably have to be positively IDed by dental records."

Seishin nodded.

"It's this hot weather," Toshio said, looking up at the radiantly clear sky. "I don't know how long they've been dead but they were left like that in this heat wave. Well, it was a hell of a sight-seeing. Thanks to that, I still can't smell anything else."

Seishin nodded to that too. He was the same from only peering in through the doorway. There was probably no comparison to Toshio who had stood in during the autopsy.

"Why.... did that..."

"Don't ask me the cause of death. They brought in a crew to do the autopsy, you know," Toshio said with a wry smile around the cigarette still in his mouth. "But then, with a parts deficit like that, I wonder if they'll really be able to tell."

"Deficit?" Seishin asked, to which Toshio responded bluntly.

"I tried counting their parts but there's not enough."

Revived in his mind were Gigorou's remains scattered around the room. Since the bedroom had been similar to the way things were in the Murasako house's kitchen, he had thought that they were more animal remains.

"That's..."

"By the time they could round up all the wild dogs and dissect them, it'd probably be long digested."

"Then, what did that to Gigorou-san was..."

"Probably wild dogs. At least we know they weren't cut apart with anything bladed. Old lady Murasako at least didn't have any external injuries. They're saying it might have been a natural death."

That's good, Seishin murmured without thinking. Toshio turned to look at Seishin.

"That's good? That it's not a case?"

"Yeah, well. ...That was imprudent of me, wasn't it. Sorry."

"I wonder about saying that to me. S'nothing even a little good about it, though."

"It was a natural death right? At the least, for Mieko-san."

"That's just it," Toshio said throwing away his cigarette. "The two old guys died a few days ago. At the very least we know they didn't die just yesterday. Mieko-san on the other hand probably died right around yesterday precisely."

"That's..."

Seishin started to say, then closed his mouth. "Yesterday....?"

"Right," Toshio said with an ironic smile. "Isn't that interesting? Old lady Mieko was here, who knows how many days, living with a corpse, in other words."

sinnesspiel

As we get to the deaths, it would seem prudent to prep readers for the upcoming onslaught of Japanese funeral rituals. I've decided to take a cue from Hirosawa's spaced out explanations and will put general notes not necessarily relevant early on into chapter sections like this so that opening readers needn't just take in a huge info-dump or feel intimidated by how many cultural details the novel may require. Thoughts, readers?

Links to Chapter 3
Chapter 3 - 1
Chapter 3 - 2
Chapter 3 - 3
Chapter 3 - 4
Chapter 3 - 5
Chapter 3 - 6
Chapter 3 - 7
Chapter 3 - 8

Chapter 3 Translation Notes
General
Household/Family Shrines

- Come in Shinto and Buddhist flavors:

Family Shrines - *Kamidama* - Not just limited to roadsides, homes often have Shinto shrines meant to house gods as well. Charms known as Ofuda are stored in them and prayers are said at the house-bound shrine where offerings of food and drink are to be set out. An example of a household shrine from Yosokan Dojo, with the mirror being the object housing the god.
Family Altars - *Butsudan* - Much like the Shinto Family Shrine, the Buddhist Family Altar often has a stand-in object such as a Jizou or painting or scroll inside, and offerings are made to this one as well.

While Family Shrines are hung like a high shelf, the Family Altars are more like cabinets, complete with doors. Also similar to the Family Shrines are that offerings are made here. Family Altars tend to have a bell that can be rang during litanies. An example from www.butudan.co.jp. Covering the main bits: **#12** is where the tablets honoring the dead are seen, and **#13** is the death register where the posthumous name, common name, and year of death are written. **#14** is where offerings are set.
Many homes have both. They're more common in rural areas than cities.

Japanese Funerals - A Brief Summary

The Family Altar is closed for 49 days. This is so that any other deceased family members may be included in the mourning, going without offerings until the deceased joins them, though offerings are left here for the deceased during that period. 49 days is said to be the amount of time it takes for the dead to cross to The Other Shore, with trials every 7 days they must overcome to release themselves and their ego and move onto a higher plane of existence. The Family Shrine is closed until the funeral is over.

A **posthumous name**

is given for the dead to use in the afterlife, so that they can further disassociate from their former existence. This name is based on their accomplishments and karma in life.

If the deceased died at home they're brought before the Family Altar where the readings and prayers take place. If the family wishes, this can still be done even if they don't die at home, even if it's not just immediately after the death as the normal bedside Sutras are. This is not quite the same thing as a wake, but it's functionally quite similar.

If the deceased dies out of the home, generally the medical staff (either at the hospital or who come to assess the body) will take care of preparing the bodies for the funeral. In other cases this is done by funeral home staff, morticians, monks, or others depending

on the situation. The dead are dressed in traditional white kimonos, though sometimes men are put in black suits.

At the wake, the family is offered donations by guests, and each guest receives a gift for their attendance proportional to their donation (about 1/4th). Prayers, incense, and more Sutras. An all night vigil is held where the immediate family stays up all night, presumably being visited by the deceased who is saying goodbye to their favorite places and people in this world.

Then there's the funeral. More prayers, more Sutras, and they are often buried with money to cross the river to the other side, snacks, cigarettes, precious objects, etc then transported off to be cremated or, more unusually but definitively the case in Sotoba, buried.

After the 49 days, the gifts are sent to the mourners who gave donations, and mourning is basically finished, aside from memorial services held on specifically numbered years after the deceased's death. popular years are the 3rd, 5th, 7th, and 13th anniversary of deaths. Incidentally we're told in

Seishin's essay

that in Sotoba, mourning services cease after the 33rd year, when even their plot is no longer a plot, but a place where a fir is placed. These elements vary depending on the specifics of the faith, like many other details. The elements described here are the bare-bones basics that are generally universal.

The family does not celebrate the Shinto celebrations for the rest of the year and do not send or receive New Years greeting cards. Astute readers and purveyors of Japanese culture will notice that Buddhism seems to be the religion of choice for death rituals, and Shintoism for most festivals and celebrations. A sharp teacher of mine in Japan remarked, in an extension of a common Japanese saying only involving Shintoism and Buddhism originally, that in Japan you are born Shinto, marry Christian, and die Buddhist. Shintoism is the religion of new lives and spirituality, Christianity is mostly opted for the stylish chapel weddings by those who may never care to read a page of a Christian bible in their life, and Buddhism focuses heavily on rebirth or not really being quite gone

so much as journeying, making it particularly appealing for those struggling with a death in the family.

In case you're wondering what the Mourning Crew and Koike are doing in all of this, here is a handy

checklist

of all the tasks that must be performed for a funeral. Most of the more daunting ones are universal issues for most culture's funerals. They are essentially making these arrangements.

Juzu -

Prayer Beads used in Japanese Buddhism, their use is similar to a Catholic rosary with beads meant to keep track of counting the sutras while they are chanted. There is also the belief that the good karma leaking off from the chanting of sutras may reside in the juzu. Sutras are typically chanted 108 times as there are believed to be 108 attachments or afflictions that plague man. If more than 108 are to be chanted, some sects start going backwards around the ring of beads to signify breaking the cycle of death and rebirth. The shapes vary between sects as do the appropriate ways of holding them when in use. The formal, larger ones with 108 beads are typically two-ringed, with or without two to four smaller beads dispersed between them. Informal ones may have fewer than 108, are a single ring, and have between 18 and 45 beads usually in some number that divides evenly into 108. Men's informal juzu tend to have larger but fewer beads, women more but smaller. The tassels also come in forms ranging from loose to braided to balled; the tassel style is largely a matter of taste. The appropriate way to hold them between the hands, over one hand, over both, beneath the thumbs, etc. varies by sect.

Examples of

men and women's

informal juzu from

http://www.butsudanya.co.jp
Examples

of holding/use styles by sect from Echo Sekizai.

Chapter 3 - 1
Equinoctial Week - The aforementioned

Higan or other shore was said in Buddhist lore to be set in the far west. At the Vernal (spring) and Autumn Equinox, the sun sets due west, and at these times they were said to be able to cross over from the other shore, and festivities or rituals similar to the aforementioned Bon are held throughout the week, honoring the dead's burial plots and family Buddhist family altars, leaving food and drink offerings to the dead and reading Buddhist sutras at grave sites. As these celebrations are a week long each time, they have those equinoxes at the center of the assigned weeks; March 21st and September 23rd. These times are right before the seasons change in Japan, making it very hot right after the March one and cold after the September one.

Chapter 3 - 4

Of course, back then they didn't quite have last names, but...

- Hirosawa mentioned that there were no last names in the

Edo period (1600s - late 1868)

. In the

Meiji Restoration

(1868) commoners were ordered to take on last names written with an approved set of kanji, but before that, they were the prerogative of samurai and aristocracy. Commoners were referred to with a descriptor of where they were from or what they did instead of their last names, with the particle "no" for "of", for example Maeda no Motoko, (Mae - before, da - field) would be "The Motoko who lives in front of the fields." Even with nobles, referring

to them with their last name, the possessive no particle, and then their first name was common, coming out as "Taira no Munemori" to use the example of our previously mentioned Saitou Sanemori's master, which would be "Taira's Munemori." This is used in Shiki on occasion due to there being so many head families and branch families that it's simple to refer to people by their household, and it's translated in that style. Later you'll notice characters referring to Toshio as "Doctor of the Ozaki's." He's being called Ozaki no Sensei there, rather than Ozaki Sensei as usual.

Temples and Shrines Part II

- Village Administration (Murakata) and Parish Guilds (Miyaza)

The bakufu are the shogun's government. Shoguns were military generals who were supposed to be a representative of the Holy (under Shintoism) Emperor over the territories they maintained, but in practice the Shoguns truly did run things until the Meiji Restoration, which was the restoration of the Emperor to true power

Under the the bakufu there were those assigned to govern each village. These leaders were the

Village Administration

. The shogunate were strong supporters of and strongly supported by Buddhism, due to varying reasons for each end of the partnership. The Village Administrators assigned their roles were often Buddhist intellectuals of high social status (not priests or the like, though many Buddhist priests also had political status). Assignment varied throughout the ages from being bakufu appointed to village elections.

Buddhist temples were often co-opted as government institutions before the Meiji Restoration. When the Emperor was returned to power (as opposed to being mostly ceremonial while military generals and shoguns were the true rulers) it was with the help of powerful Shintoists and Shintoist intellectuals, whom viewed the Emperor's line as sacred and his rule divine right. Thus Shintoism

was instated as the national religion again and the Village Administrations' leaders who were previously in charge of Buddhist religious matters were superseded by Shintoists, called the

Parish Guild

or the Miyaza. They were the ones privileged to engage in Shrine rituals directly;at times,if there were no Shinto priest, they would be the ones to handle the holy relics or go into the areas lay people were not allowed in. Different roles were open to different people, by birth, by election, by status, etc. here as well. In some areas, the Village Administration's government control remained more or less unchanged beyond this, being more or at least as much a government institution as a Buddhist one. In some areas, the Parish Guilds took on more political power, owning land and businesses whose proceeds went to the temple, or to the Parish Guild in the name of the temple. The degree of coexistence, blending, or contest betwixt the groups varied as well as which prevailed.

Chapter 3 - 5
Shouji

- Sliding wood framed doors with paper rather than solid wood or other materials. If you've ever seen a traditional Japanese setting in a movie, anime, manga, etc., you've seen them, but here's a note in case you didn't know what they were called.

Example

from Wikimedia Commons.

Tatami

- Straw wound floor mats. Similarly, you've probably seen them, they're the most common Japanese home setting's flooring but in case you don't know what they're called, now you do. It's common to give room size descriptors by how many tatami mats it fits, with the standard tatami length being twice the width,

Example

from Wikimedia Commons.

Chapter 3 - 6
Hashimoto's Disease

- An autoimmune disease where the patient's own immune system attacks their thyroid, leading to hypothyrodism with bouts of hyperthyroidism. Generally treated with hormones replacing those the thyroid can't produce.

Ozaki is going to throw out a lot of medical terms throughout this series and right now I don't tend to translation note them all as they're not exactly a cultural matter unless you count medical culture, but Hashimoto's disease sounds terribly Japanese, even if it's not more particularly prevalent in Japan than anywhere else. If readers want me to summarize them rather than having to slog through a potentially technical Wikipedia article, I probably can, but I'll be sticking with technical terms in the text to the extent Japanese technical terms are used (it's usually him talking to other medical professionals). Despite how uneducated I seem, I am, at least in theory, involved in the investigation of crimes in medical facilities, so I'm unusually familiar with basic medical terminology for a blithering idiot otaku

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Chapter 4

1

He stared at the morning mist wavering above the asphalt.

The silent, chilled highway drew in from the west, with a wide winding turn towards the village entrance. The path out of the village crossed the bridge that saddled the mountain stream and headed south, beneath the expressway's overpass.

In the night a sudden unease took him. Feeling rushed by something in the night, unable to sleep, he listened to the radio, only for it to make him feel all the more like he was being cornered by those radio waves. Rolling about in his bed, unable to bear it, as soon as dawn broke he left the house. Unable to seize the mood of a casual stroll, his pace broke into a run, towards the national highway as if being pulled along by it.

A baseless irritation, impatience for something he himself couldn't name. The highway stretched out, chilled, wordlessly running southerly. He pondered its end. The road ran towards the city, piercing fields and hills, leaving the neighborhoods of the village behind. Even with the knowledge that the asphalt beneath his very feet connected this small mountain village to a bustling town, the adults about him spoke of it as his "future," so terribly detached from any present sense of reality.

Passing through one more today, tomorrows were piled up thick. He suspected the pile of tomorrows had approximately no relation to the "future" the adults spoke of, thinking that this road breathed into the reaches of eternity. Would this road really lead to the city if he walked along it? Even if he tried to imagine it, all he could see

was his own figure being swallowed up in the morning mist.

Sometimes a truck would rush through shaking the silent stillness, passing him by and driving south as he saw it off, with some strange sense of restraint. It was a runaway's morning. Pressed by the feeling of having no place to have himself, but all the same having a hard time extracting himself from where he was, he idly waited for the sun to rise from the eastern mountain ridge. Soon enough with nothing else to do, with the languid voices of the cicadas as his impetus, just like always, with painful reluctance as if the hairs on his back were being pulled in protest, he turned back, the morning sun throwing vivid shadows over the western mountains behind him.

Casting his eyes down from the brilliant rays, he returned towards his house. He'd felt just a little like he'd be beaten down and at the same time relieved, a mystery to himself as much as anyone.

This morning once again he returned through the country paddy fields while gazing where his heart longed for. In the short time he had been at the highway, the village awoke. Even on a Sunday the village's early rising didn't change. The houses along the narrow pathway opened their windows, signs and presences of people about. The morning fog dispersed, the eastern mountain's shadow whittled away, and the sun shone strongly into his face as he walked north. ---Today'd be hot again.

As his eyes narrowed against the light, his hand shading over his eyes, a brown furball came flying beneath his feet. At the same time came a crisp voice.

"Taro!"

Turning to look back over his shoulder towards the voice, there she came rushing, holding onto a leash. The Shiba Inu frolicking at his feet had no collar. That would, then, be the ring that was dangling from the end of the leash she held.

"I am so sorry. ---Taro, come here."

Ritsuko was in a flustered hurry, seizing the dog whose tail wagged as if it would fall off. The Shiba, now too big to be called a puppy, was either over-excited or excessively healthy, refusing to stay in place in her arms even once caught. With the help of the one the dog had eagerly tripped up, at last the collar was able to be fastened.

"I just changed his collar thinking it was too big but I wonder if it's still too loose? It came right off. Sorry, and thanks. ---Natsuno-kun, wasn't it?"

When Ritsuko spoke, he scowled. He suddenly turned away, silent, without any hint of small talk returned greetings, most unpleasant. Ritsuko thought that he must not have remembered her. They'd met at the hospital countless times. Even so, to him she was nothing more than one of the nurses, and perhaps he couldn't differentiate between each of them.

"Out jogging? Your leg's all better now?"

The question came as much because he was in a T-shirt and jersey as because it would end on a bad note to separate with greetings going the way they had.

She was certain that he was a patient who had come in quite some time ago with a knot on his shin. It was a common ailment of growing boys. It would usually take care of itself during the growth period and in his case he'd come in for prescriptions of pain killers but not since then, so the pain must have stopped, too.

"..... My leg is better. There was some weird bump under my knee, though."

"The cartridge hardened. Then, it must have stopped hurting," Ritsuko said, Natsuno giving a sour nod. Thinking she wasn't making any ground, she was just about to say her goodbyes when Natsuno himself spoke up.

"Uhm, Nurse?"

"Mm?"

"Once you get that kind of lump in your bone, you're finished growing I heard but is that true?"

There was something charming about how seriously he asked. In a hurry to move onward, Taro pulled her two, three steps forward, Natsuno following awaiting his answer.

"They do say that.... but there's nothing set in stone about it." Being pulled into a walk by the dog Taro, she went with no destination, Natsuno at her side. "It is true. When the cartridge ossifies, that is the sign that it's finished growing, yes. But, just because you're past the phase of growing as quickly as you did in middle school, it doesn't mean that your growth has come to a complete stop, so...."

"I see..." It was funny, how complicated his thoughts sounded as he spoke. At the same time he sounded relieved.

They had met at the hospital two or three times but beyond that Ritsuko had caught sight of him who knew how many times during an early morning walk. Natsuno was looking at the national highway. The sight of the boy standing and longing, as if yearning for the south, made it seem as if any minute he'd start off on foot out of the village. She had the urge to call out to him, as if she had to stop him but, at the same time if she called out to him, it seemed like that would be what drove his back forward towards the south, and so she couldn't. ---That image was so powerful that the fact that he was quite worried about whether he'd grow any more or not like a normal young man, knowing such a trivial thing could be on his mind, was somehow a relief.

"Natsuno-kun is entering high school this year, was it?"

"Yes ma'am. ... Could you please stop that." The young boy's voice was blunt, his displeasure naked.

"Mm?"

"Calling me by my first name."

Ah,

Ritsuko nodded.

Should she call him by his last name Yuuki or his last name Koide? His father's last name was Yuuki and his mother's last name was Koide. The couple weren't together in the family register, and he was under his mother's name. So she thought it had been Koide on his insurance card. Around the hospital he was known by his first name, Natsuno. What to call somebody with two last names was a conundrum for anybody; it may have been the office's Mutou, who was friends with his father Yuuki, who had called him that.

"You hate it? Your name."

Natsuno nodded with a sour face.

"I think it's a good name, though. It's fresh. Your mother gave it to you, right?"

"My old man. I guess it's some noble's name."

"I see. Your father, he's a Romanticist."

Natsuno grimaced. "If he wasn't he we wouldn't have moved, not to a place like this."

"It is a simple, empty country village, after all," Ritsuko said with a smile, making Natsuno bow his head in sudden shame.

"I didn't... really mean it like that."

"Even if you did mean it like that, isn't it fine? It's the truth after all."

---It's like the stock model of the sticks, out here.

Yes, it's been called that. That's just what it is.

---In the last few years of its life, it feels like. It isn't any place for

the young.

(That it is not.)

Ritsuko looked out over the village. The V shape carved into the mountain ridges could be seen as open scissor blades. Like it would someday suddenly snap shut, squashing out the village and its people.

"That's right.... It really is a simple country town. To those like your father, who always lived in the city, it might be thought of as curious, in a good way, but..."

"There's a shortage of nurses isn't there, right now?"

"Hm? Well, maybe."

"Then, I do not think you would have trouble finding work no matter where you went. Don't you think of leaving here and going to the city or something?"

"That's true...."

The early rising elderly recognized Ritsuko and called out to her. There were those watering their gardens, those cleaning the street, and children passing by calling out to her in bright voices as they hurried down the road. On Sunday there were no radio exercises, so they must have been going off to play.

"I guess it's because I was born here."

'Morning!' called out a voice from behind before passing by on her bicycle; it was Hirosawa Mayumi. She waved her hand at the both of them and continued off in the same direction as the children, to the north. She was going to work, no doubt.

Hirosawa Mayumi was from the Shimo-Sotoba's Ohkawa household who married into the Hirosawa household---the one called Kohiro or Small Hiro. She used to work at the Mizobe credit union but since marrying, she worked at the register at the super market, Tamo, at the top of the shopping district. She was the third generation, with no kids yet herself. ---Ritsuko was like that, well

informed about the various tidbits of the village.

What functions and events were for which seasons, who did what during them, who was from what family and how they were related by marriage. Even while she wasn't especially interested in it, she would naturally hear it, and without trying to remember it, she remembered. Lately her job only spurred that on. Working as a nurse in the village's only hospital, she ended up knowing things down to the finest detail, becoming more and more at ease and familiar. Whenever she walked down the street, there would always be an incessant stream of voices calling out to her.

"With acquaintances and the like and friends and the like, and all those different relationships in place, I guess I just can't get in the mindset to decide where else to live."

"Or where to have a boyfriend?"

At Natsuno's playful question, she gave a light glower. "That isn't a part of it."

"Even though it's really inconvenient...."

"I don't know of any place more convenient, so I don't think of it as inconvenient."

She laughed, but Ritsuko supposed that he could want out of the village. Natsuno moved to Sotoba during middle school, so being raised in the city, wanting to return to the place he was used to living was perhaps if anything only natural.

"I don't get it. Is it that 'wherever you live's the center of everything' thing? If we're talking about merits, there isn't anything to brag about either. The firs or the sotoba...."

That's right,

Ritsuko nodded.

---It's like some kind of bad omen, huh? It's eerie.

If you were speaking of Sotoba the village out loud it was going

to be heard as an ill-omened word. Everyone here had been teased about it at least once by the kids in school from other towns. But, that woodworking had become less prominent. At one time Sotoba may have stood as a base for building coffins and the like but nowadays the elderly's only manual labor was crafting sotoba. Even the number who did that was decreasing. As woodworking declined, what rose were agriculture and forestry, and most of the households with a family monopolized trade were in decline, to the point where most households had secondary jobs.

Ritsuko's household was one of those stock Sotoba families, her widowed mother tilling their narrow field, with Ritsuko and her little sister working to supplement the family budget. ---No, if you were being precise, now it was Ritsuko who supported the household economy. Her mother's harvests were only enough for one household, and what they came up short on her little sister's income supplemented.

Ritsuko let out a sigh for no particular reason, turning her eyes towards the western mountain. The slope was covered in firs, at the foot a small opening of fields. Amidst the forest of firs catching the light was a rain gutter or something similar on the Kanemasa mansion.

"...That house, they never did move into it, did they."

Ritsuko murmured, Natsuno turning to look at it dubiously.

"That house?" He parroted Ritsuko's line of sight, letting out an 'ah.' "---The Kanemasa house."

That building must have inspired her in some way; there was recently talk about wanting to rebuild the house a lot. Ritsuko's family was an old farming family. There were an excess of rooms and the aging fixtures were undeniably inconvenient. Reconstruction would be a welcome change but if it came to doing actual refurbishing, that task would fall on Ritsuko.

(Even though she should know better.)

Her father died early, and her mother left the forests untended,

unable to even cultivate the field that wasn't that broad in the first place. Their savings, if there were enough to call savings, weren't enough for a family. Her mother should not have been unaware of that. ---Her mother demanded a family of Ritsuko.

---If you got out of this old tedious village, you'd feel better.

So get married, she was told. She didn't hate the idea of marrying her partner, and of course it wasn't that she didn't want to be married. She herself knew that if she let this chance get away from her, she wouldn't ever be able to wed.

(But...)

Then why couldn't she work up the determination to do it? Ritsuko's mother wanted her to leave the village behind, restart the family elsewhere and look after her for the foreseeable future. She herself may have even wished to do that. But, her mother's clear expectations were a weight on her chest. Thinking about that made her want to flee but, if she ran away then next her sister would be bound to the role. Thinking of that wrought the same weight in her chest. If she were to run away with a partner who said 'that village' with such scorn, all the more so.

"Now that you mention it, my old man was saying he'd seen a moving truck. On the day of the mushiokuri."

"That's right, Natsuno-kun's father performed as a yuge-shuu, didn't he?"

Mm, Natsuno nodded. "On the night of the mushiokuri as they were burning the Betto, he was saying they saw a moving truck. But, it turned back. They must've taken the wrong road."

Mm,

Ritsuko nodded.

Being pulled along by Taro as she was, she found herself at the riverbed road that lead to the highway. She thought that maybe Natsuno was coming back from this highway himself but, having a feeling she shouldn't touch that topic, she didn't dare to ask. The

highway stretched in from the west here to where it intersected with the riverbed road, drawing out into a large curve that went south. This was the southern boundary of the village.

"Natsuno-kun, thirsty?"

"I didn't bring my wallet."

"It's my treat. When I come with my little sister, I always end up treating her."

Ritsuko laughed, stepping up to the vending machine in the Chigusa parking lot which was just around the corner. Chigusa was the commonly known name of the drive-in, ran by Yano Kanami with one other working girl. How old Kanami was, what kind of person---Ritsuko knew all of that about her. It didn't matter that she had a ten year age difference from Kanami, and that Kanami was rarely ever a patient at the hospital.

After putting the coins into the coin slot of the vending machine in the drive-in parking lot that faced the road, Ritsuko took out the cold can. Putting in the coins for Natsuno, she opened her can looking out over the road that swept by the village. On the other side of the highway, not far off she could see the bus stop. The empty but stop looked to be deserted.

Progression and decay---change did continue in the village without end. Only, the village was left behind from the outside world, the distance from the world beyond growing. That's how Ritsuko thought of it. A far off world, a deserted village. This village, too, would not necessarily always remain. The young left. The old died. Little by little becoming a smaller, more forlorn existence, all while being left behind alone.

"The Murasako's Obaa-chan... passed away, didn't she?"

"Murasako--in Yamairi? Yesterday, three corpses were found in Yamairi I heard, but." Natsuno asked, pulling the pull-ring of the can.

"Yup. But, just the other day, she was at the hospital. She came to

pick up the Ohkawa's Ojii-chan's medicine for him. She seemed very healthy, and yet now, with everyone gone, it's strange."

Long ago--when the village was formed and still crafting sotoba, the villagers did their logging from Yamairi, bringing the trees down to the riverbed road by horse to Monzen. In Monzen, the firs were cut into lumber, then further cut down into sotoba. When Ritsuko was a child, there were lumber saw mills and carpentry shops here and there in the village. Those carpentry shops faded one by one, and entry to Yamairi also became less common. With the mere three elderly inhabitants left dead, the neighborhood Yamairi was extinguished. Was that how Sotoba too would at last disappear? She wondered. There would be fewer people, they'd take out the bus stop, only a few people would still make their homes there and, one fateful day, someone would try to pay a visit and they would all be dead. ---Sotoba's end. Was that day coming?

"Nurse," Natsuno spoke up. "Is it true that the three in Yamairi were murdered?"

Ritsuko blinked awake from her reverie. "Oh no. It's turned into a murder story?"

"That's just what I heard."

"The doctor said they died a natural death. They did an autopsy didn't they? He stood in for the autopsy. It was some kind of sickness, he said there wasn't any particular crime."

"What?" Natsuno smiled cynically. "I thought as much."

"Thought as much?"

Natsuno shrugged his shoulders. "Some freak went in, it sounds like some people are saying. But, I didn't think that could happen. I mean, you wouldn't normally think people were living that far back in this backwoods place, not normally."

Ritsuko blinked. "That may be right."

"When I heard there's a place at the end of the forest road where there're still people living, I thought it was a lie. I couldn't believe

it. I thought it was one thing to be living out here where there's not even a train and all but the buses don't even run to Yamairi!"

"Is that right... that is right. We know about Yamairi but people from outside might think like that."

"People who don't have anything to do with the village coming in here worked up would be weird in itself. If they did come into the village all the way to the top, they'd think the road ends there, wouldn't they? They wouldn't think there were houses beyond that where people lived and all."

"That... may be true."

"So then, there's no choice but to think the culprit is a villager, is there? But, if there was someone as dangerous as that, everyone'd know. It's that kind of place."

"That's true."

"Everyone keeps watch on each other, collecting every last detail around here."

At Natsuno's voice which seemed to be muttering to himself, Ritsuko's gaze fell with a forced smile.

Right---it might look that way. To someone from the outside.

(This old tedious village)

If you got out, you'd feel better.

(.....Even so.)

The people she knew well, the village that had become so familiar with her and she with it. Leaving that village, to a town where she knew no one. Relying on a person who could not grasp how she missed it. ----To Ritsuko, it didn't even seem possible.

When she raised her gaze, Natsuno gripped his can, looking south. It was possible that Ritsuko would become like that too. Standing at the highway at the break of dawn longing for Sotoba; it

wasn't a life she wanted.

"Lately there aren't many families that make sotoba anymore are there? ..... Even though I love that smell."

Natsuno turned and blinked. "The smell? The firs?"

Ritsuko nodded.

"I love that smell of the firs. Don't you think it has a certain austerity to it?"

"Isn't that just because you know it's the smell of making sotoba?"

"Probably. ... Yes, it's the smell of nostalgia, remembering the dead." Ritsuko said, something cheerful in her mood as she looked up to the sky. "---All right, we'll use firs to build the new house!"

"New house?" Natsuno looked up at Ritsuko in bewilderment, Taro too looking up blankly.

"Yup! We're rebuilding. Our current house, it's pretty old now."

Ritsuko smiled and looked down at Taro.

"Taro, we're going back. ---Do you want a new dog house, too?"

"Whoa."

As her son's voice rose up in the living room, Tanaka Sachiko turned from the kitchen to look at him.

The kitchen was one step down from the four and a half tatami mat living room. The floor was technically covered in boarding planks but it was still ultimately called a dirt floor. The hard packed clay floor around the kitchen door spread wide, and there was a washing machine in the corner. Previously there was the furnace opening for the bath in that space. Next to the washing machine could be seen the door to the bathroom, all remnants of an old fashioned house fixture. Sachiko's house was built by an old farming family and left that way. She'd thought many times about

how she'd like to rebuild it but her husband's parents suffered a long illness and thanks to that they didn't have that much of a savings surplus to afford it.

"Hey, Yamairi got a mention!"

Sachiko's son turned his body to face her from the living room, pointing to the newspaper. Making a noise of interest, Sachiko stopped washing to bend down and see, taking a seat on the step between the living room and kitchen levels. "So that's what today's patrol cars were for."

"Heeh..."

Sachiko's eyes passed over the small---to the point where it was just page filler--article to know the cause of the prior day's uproar. It seemed like some people had died in Yamairi, or so she had heard rumors of yesterday at least but of course she didn't know any particulars.

"Oh but, they're saying it wasn't like it was a crime or anything, aren't they?"

"We don't know that." Her son Akira said with a somehow expectant tone. When she agreed, her tone was colored with the same tone.

"What's wrong?"

The girl who appeared in the living room tilted her head. Akira happily pointed to the newspaper

"Kaori, Yamairi got a mention!"

"Don't you mean Onee-chan?" Sachiko said, folding the paper. "Kaori, are you going out?"

"Yup. I thought I'd take Love along swimming."

"Instead of that, let's hit Yamairi!" Akira stood up. "Sure has been a while since I've been to the mountains."

"Now stop that." Sachiko glared at her son. Akira had just entered middle school and still showed no signs of calming down. He was always saying childish things. "Three people just died, it's a bad omen. You'll be taken up by an Oni."

"That's retarded. ---Hey, Kaori, let's go."

Sachiko gave Akira a light, small poke. "If you have that much free time, then do your homework. You still have some to finish yet, don't you? --Kaori, watch your step. The water level's low, so the riverbed is slippery."

"Kay."

"It's fine to take the dog to play in the water but don't let him roll around there. If he bathes in that water, he'll come back dirtier than he left."

Seishin took in the sun's scorching rays as he headed towards the neighborhood of Kami-Sotoba. Gotouda Shuuji's funeral went as planned. The chief mourner, Fuki, was the sister of the deceased Murasako Hidemasa but she married out of the Murasako household. The ill fates of the Murasakos were ultimately the burdens of the Murasako family, the Gotouda family being a separate entity, and more than anything it was summer so Shuuji's burial needed to be hurried. The Murasako couple's corpses were taken away for an autopsy, when they would return unknown. Thus for the time being the burial went as planned, though the mourners' interest was not on Shuuji but in the community of Yamairi.

"No matter how old they were, three people, all at once is, well..."

"Didn't some lunatic kid come in from Mizobe or something? It's become such a dangerous world."

"You said it. I mean, I myself have never locked my doors since the day I was born. I wonder if this isn't a sign of the end of that era?"

"I mean just a little while ago wasn't there talk of that outsider

who ran over a child?"

Seishin was in a separate room but due to it being summer time the sliding screens and shouji were pulled back. All of the mass' conversations leaked through.

In any case, circumstances being what they were, speculations were flying. It seemed the villagers were largely thinking of it as a crime. A thief or possibly a madman was the culprit. If so then the perpetrator was not a villager but without a doubt someone from outside. ---That was the village's "common sense" at work.

'Weren't they attacked by some mountain dogs?' came the slightly more peaceable explanation, popularly given amongst a few of the elderly who even now entered the mountains for forestry.

"They're really multiplying up there you know. Another housing district was built near Mizobe. Those fellas abandon their dogs in the mountains."

"To make sure they don't come home, they drive them all the way out here to abandon them. And not puppies or old dogs either. The point is they got tired of taking care of it or something, they're unmanageable, so they bring them out here."

"The Inoda's Motosaburou-san, wasn't it? The guy that horrible mess happened to in early spring. In Yamairi."

"Right, right. That guy's mountain was to the east of Yamairi and all. That's where he was attacked by a mountain dog, a hell of a scene. The dog that attacked him, too, they were saying it was one of those what're they called, a big western breed dog. One of those long haired ones you see in pet shops. Dogs go in and out of fashion like anything else, those bunch from the city throw them out once they're not fashionable anymore."

Seishin inclined his ears towards the voices he could hear amongst the clamor. While saying it was mountain dogs, the cause of those mountain dogs was ultimately not the village itself but the outside. Middle-aged women gossiped about whether it wasn't a double suicide. They lived alone in the mountains as they were,

with no relatives to rely on. They were left in the middle of the mountains to be ruined by illness or age, and unable to suffer that they committed suicide, or perhaps Murasako Mieko was at her wits end and a forced double suicide took place; there were such explanations of that as well. And this was caused by government administrative deficiency, of a social welfare deficiency, or the children who had treated them cruelly and left the village, of course it was not caused by anything within the village.

The village was isolated from the outside world. The village rejected the outside world, you could even say. Like this they discussed from various angles the idea of "death intruding from the outside world" and yet, oddly enough, regardless of the explanations offered by Seishin and Toshio, that it was neither an incident nor an accident, the opinion that it was a natural death, was, as if the possibility never existed, not given so much as a breath.

Yes---"that" always came from outside of the village. What really came was not something that came from the town of Mizobe, nor from any of the neighboring communities, it came from much further---no, not from the city beyond the bypass, either. It came from what was not a part of the village, from the firs that surrounded the village within them. The forest of firs were not a part of the village, they were outside of it. "That" was within the firs, coming into the village from outside to seize the villagers. It took the villagers to the boundary line outside the village, towards the border between life and death.

(.....Shiki.)

Ohkawa Tomio expressed his outrage to the drinkers at the corner counter of the liquor shop.

"Suddenly, there's a phone call saying that my uncle's dead. When I hurry on up there in a rush, it's not a sight a man should see. Sure enough I was told that it was my uncle but, even if you tell me that there's no way I could know. The man was rotted on top of being in pieces!"

The old men at the counter's faces, red with inebriation, all

scowled at once.

"He wasn't just rotted from heat. Maggots were crowded in there, I take a look at the old man's face and I thought I was looking at bone it was so white. Just when I'm thinking that it's moving, I realize it's the maggots gathered in his face." He continued on with grand exaggerations, planting the seeds of nightmares in all those around. "On top of that, in the empty houses all over and from my uncle's house, seems there were torn up bits of rabbits or dogs found scattered around. Spots of blood were all here and there to. They had to have gotten mixed up with some punk from somewhere who was off in the head. Not a doubt he killed old man Gigorou and the Murasako couple then flew the coup. The cops are all saying shit about it being wild dogs, but I say like hell!"

As Ohkawa Atsushi heard his father's coarse voice rise up the stairs, he nursed a complex feeling. Throwing himself down on the bed atop the tatami mats, he scowled at the ceiling.

(Someone went to Yamairi...) Dead bodies and torn apart animals, a blood stained house. (...hunting.)

Atsushi tried to draw such a mental image looking at the ceiling above. Blood, entrails, corpses. The sinews of muscles frayed, somehow made his blood boil. Murderer, weapon, mayhem. Corpses and blood. Something pooled in the pit of his stomach, an itchy impatience making him feel as if he were wavering. Somehow, he felt like he could neither stay there nor stand to go.

"Damn... there's no way to blow off some steam..."

If he went to the recently emptied Yamairi and recklessly crashed the whole joint, maybe this inexplicable feeling would blow away with that steam. But, thought Atsushi. When he snuck into Kanemasa to do the same thing, when the time came, Atsushi was seized with fear and ran away. Remembering that, something bitter from the depth of his stomach rose. What if he ended up stuck in the role of the schmuck doing something like that again?

There was a pause in his father's gruff voices, and when it continued it shouted up to the second floor.

"Hey, Atsushi, a delivery!"

People passed through to get to the village. People filled their ears up with information and came jogging back as if to return before it leaked out, bursting from their mouths from the intense internal pressure. Yet regardless, when the local Takami stopped by to pay a visit, they kept their mouths tightly shut. The only one to proactively open his mouth was Katou Kyousuke.

"A lot of people died in Yamairi, right? I know who did it."

At the sound of the child's voice, Takami turned his body as Kyousuke distinctly pointed towards the western mountain.

"It's that house. That place is full of demons, they did it."

His grandmother Yukie quickly covered his mouth.

"Don't say things like that. ---I'm sorry for him. That curious house was built and he's just completely convinced it's a haunted house."

"It's true..." Kyousuke added with a whisper, but it seemed the adults weren't listening. True, Kyousuke once again quietly repeated before he closed his mouth.

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2

"Oh, it's the Junior Doctor!"

Toshio turned towards the voice calling out from the side of the parking lot to see three women standing and talking. Standing under the bowers beside the gate to avoid the sun's rays, they fanned themselves with their handkerchiefs while seeming to make lively gossip. Thinking it'd be a pain, Toshio picked up his pace towards the car. Either way their topic was obvious.

The bells chimed from the mountains. The sounds of funeral bells. He managed to escape to the inside of his car, avoiding the women standing and chatting but the seat was scorching hot, leaving Toshio thoroughly demoralized and worn down to the bone all the same.

The tragedy in Yamairi had the people of the village all wound and worked up. They gathered here and there, seemingly to solidify their theories. They must have heard from somewhere or another that Toshio stood in on the autopsy, and thanks to that despite it being his no-consultation day, he had plenty of patients. Making a face like it was entirely natural they requested examinations, and on top of that he had plenty of requests for house calls. And when asked what they wanted to ask about there, it wasn't about the one calling him in, it was commentary on the Yamairi incident. Even though he cut into the words of and shut up the patients who wanted to make idle chatter, there was no end to the patients to see. To put it bluntly he was fed up with them.

With that in mind, being beaten down by the smoldering heat in the car, Toshio headed towards Mizuguchi. Down the village road to the south, the long and narrow village community stretched out

on the opposite bank. Just across that bridge was Mizuguchi.

In the lowest reaches of Mizuguchi, in a narrow farm field and amongst the forests that were so thick it couldn't even be called part of the village anymore was a miserable little hovel, Itou Ikumi's house. Calling it a miserable little hovel was by no means an invalid statement. The old building was so worn by the years that at a glance anyone would think anything so laid to waste was abandoned. The warped and slanted roof's tiles were broken and the sheet iron planks that handled the rain runoff were rusted and spotted with holes. It was questionable whether it could even open, the window with the wooden frame's glass so filthy that it couldn't even fulfill its function as glass. The glass door to the entryway was lurched open, an old fashioned electric light with a broken shade hanging down from above, the light bulb ever unlit.

"Good day."

Toshio stepped inside past the glass door, calling out. Inside was a dim dirt floor, the air heavy with heat, enough to choke someone easily with the strong odor of incense floating about. The dirt floor of the entryway continued to the other side, straight ahead, the depths of which from the daughter of the Ikumis Tamae poked her face out. She was about three years Toshio's senior but with a face seeming to be worn out, she'd aged to the point where one could think she'd lapped him.

Tamae's eyes seemed somehow hollow as she spoke her gratitude for the house visit, thank you for coming all this way. Chunky and rotund, Tamae being the very picture of lethargy was how Toshio had always remembered her being, as far back as his memory could go. Just as Tamae was raising her face from her bow, a voice resonated from within the house.

"Is it the doctor? Come in."

Toshio nodded in acknowledgement to Tamae, heading in past the dirt floor. Beyond the open glass door, in the six mat corner of a room like a cellar, before the kitchen entrance, there was a thin futon spread out. On that sat a woman. This was Tamae's mother, Ikumi.

"By all means, do come in."

A smile rose up over Ikumi's whole face, thin in contrast to that of her daughter's. Toshio withheld the sigh he felt inside as he came up into the six mat room. He narrowly managed to squeeze himself into an opening on the tatami to sit. The reason for such minimal space was because of the tools of the family trade. There was enough to cram up half of the room, counting neither the family altar nor the family shrine, before which was a stand with an incense burner large enough to be mistaken for a brazier, in it incense sticks burning, smoking the room in dark soot, and there were two shelves with a strange luster to them, lined with ambiguous, cryptic little objects coated in dust.

Toshio drew his eyes from that and professionally took out his medical bag. "What's wrong?"

"Since yesterday, I've been so hot."

So Ikumi said but her face was brimming. At the very least she seemed healthier than anyone else he'd met today.

"Your temperature?" Toshio asked, taking out a thermometer. He knew full well from experience this household didn't have medical thermometer. Ikumi frequently requested house calls but she'd never even put out a cushion to sit on, nor served a single cup of tea. He was pretty sure there weren't any cushions for guests to sit on in the house anyway. He had his doubts about whether there were even teacups for guests' use.

Ikumi cheerfully took the thermometer in hand and put it in her armpit. As Toshio took her pulse and blood pressure readings, talk of Yamairi began. How she was surprised by the patrol cars rushing by Takemura, how surprised she was when she heard a just dreadful case occurred in Yamairi, personal criticisms on the Murasako couple and old man Gigorou, she went sounding off on all such things. Ikumi had a tendency to be a tight lipped and gloomy woman but at the very least towards Toshio, she burst out a flood of words as always. He mechanically put the stethoscope to her.

Ikumi was a famous miser. Even in this day and age she used firewood from the mountains in a wood burning stove, and she used the neighbor's baths for hot water. Though she was loath to spend a single yen, she frequently called Toshio out for house calls. He had a theory that her reasoning may have been colored by her hang-ups about doctors--or maybe about the household known as 'Ozaki'---that if you went to the hospital for an examination, they'd examine things that didn't need to be examined charging unnecessary medical fees, so she probably believed. In any case, having come, there wasn't really a thing wrong with Ikumi. Every time something happened in the village, she'd call Toshio out and on the rare occasion there was something wrong, she'd refuse medicine and treatment. Of course, she had no insurance. The mother and child farmed a narrow field and garden, and the rest that they ate was at the generosity of others.

Toshio performed a perfunctory examination, and merely answered that there was nothing particularly abnormal.

"Is that so? How strange, I do feel ever so sluggish," Ikumi said, suddenly turning with a 'by the way!' "Seems Gotouda-san's Shuuji-san has passed away, yes? I wonder if that hasn't got some connection to Yamairi?"

"Connection?"

"I mean, isn't it strange, so many dead people in succession like that. And moreover, Shuuji-san was Murasako's Hidemasa's nephew, wasn't he? Makes you wonder if there's something to it, doesn't it? And the Murasako family, it was down to just Hidemasa wasn't it? Hidemasa-san and Fuki-san were the only two left but there were originally five siblings you know, from that house. And yet, three of them died young. On top of that, Mieko-san's last child was a stillbirth, too...."

Toshio packed away his stethoscope, breathing a sigh. "You're not trying to say it's a curse again, now are you?"

"Oh dear," said Ikumi as if shocked. "I just mean, isn't it curious? That three people of the same stock died in succession."

"Gigorou-san died too, you know."

"Gigorou-san was like a part of the family to the Murasako household. I wonder if he might not have been a victim of circumstance, you know?."

"What circumstances are we talking about? Try not to make it sound too stupid."

"I thought that the Junior Doctor would say as much but the truth is, I saw it."

"Saw what?"

"The truth is, what was it, ten days ago now? I saw a strange dream. A pitch black cloud over Yamairi. That was all there was to the dream but it struck a chord in me. That something no good is going to come to Yamairi."

"It's just a dream. ---Well, see ya."

Toshio said as he said that while rising to a stand when Ikumi gripped at him. She clung to him with her full body weight hanging off of him, not about to let go easily.

"Ikumi-san."

"I knew. I was certain that unhappiness would befall Yamairi. Then, after Shuuji-san, there was that uproar. Be sure, something happened at the Murasako house. Back when I was young, there's something I told Mieko-san. I told her that family is no good, you, in entering into the family like that, will not meet an easy end, I told her. But still, Mieko-san is a person who won't open her ears when people speak. And then there was that dream, wasn't there? It struck a chord with me but, I didn't want to have weird faces made at me again. So I stayed quiet then but, knowing and doing nothing doesn't feel very good now does it? So you see, I did a special prayer, a prayer that nothing bad would befall the Murasako household. As I did, in the very middle of prayer, a gecko appeared, twice no less!"

"Okay," Toshio said curtly, trying to pry her grip off but once he

got the right hand off, her left took hold.

"This is no good, I thought! That isn't all, either. Look, I've been saying it all along haven't I? This year something's strange! When I read New Year's fortunes, I had a bad premonition, did I not? Then we had this heat and this drought! On top of that, as soon as the year began, I had a bad feeling from that Kanemasa house. I've felt like it's stagnant with evil. For a while now I thought that stagnation's been flowing towards Yamairi. And then there's that precognitive dream, yes? I thought it wasn't good that the Kanemasa estate was sold. That solidified the feel of the village for the worst. To begin with, Kanemasa is what you would call a fated lot, after all. "

"Ikumi-san, you do know I don't have the time to be listening to your pretentious rants?"

"Oh, just listen, I'm not saying anything bad. That house at Kanemasa, it's not good. That house's direction is no good. The position of the gate is strange, isn't it, it wasn't a good idea to build over the old Kanemasa house. At least they should have set it like it was before. I thought about going to tell them that, I went to visit, but there's nobody there to visit now is there? Be sure of it, it's bad luck. I'd even bet on it. They had plans to come but some misfortune befell them, so they weren't able to move in. It's not impossible, that house, they build it to move in."

"Ikumi-san."

"I'm not finished yet. You go ahead and just see if anybody really moves into that house. Worse things'll come to pass if they do. Junior Doctor, did you know? Near here are statues of the three wise monkeys, aren't there? They were broken, the other day. Right around the time the three died in Yamairi, that it was. When I thought about it and went to look, the O-jizo-san and the Koubou-sama statue in front of the Shrine were broken too. Its head was knocked off and it was torn to pieces. If you listen, you'll hear them talking about how Gigorou-san's body was torn to pieces too, yes? There's a connection there, don't you think as much?"

"Personally I can't help but think there's no connection at all,

but," Toshio said coldly tearing Ikumi's hand off. "Anyway, there's nothing especially wrong with you, so. If possible, before calling me in you could try thinking a little more rationally about how bad you're really feeling?"

Oh my, Ikumi scowles at Toshio. "I am quite rational, I will have you know. It seems you don't believe what I'm saying. However, ever since I'd seen that strange, precognitive dream, I've been feeling dreadful. I think it's clear I've been in contact by something ominous. I've been like that ever since then, really."

"Sure," Toshio said dismissively as he stepped down onto the dirt floor. He desperately wished never to have to pay Ikumi another house call examination again but he was certain he'd be called in again. If Ikumi called in directly there were times when he could try to turn her down, passing it off by asking how she was doing over the phone. But, without fail if the phone call came from her daughter Tamae, if he refused the house call, she'd break out into crying hysterics. After being rejected, she'd whine cloyingly until eventually, she'd be winded and collapse; it'd come to the point before where Tamae herself would have to be brought in by ambulance. Toshio's father had a certain antipathy towards the mother-daughter pair, a vein popped out in anger but, even still his patience would be worn down and, in the end, even while hot with rage, he'd head out. It was unfortunately likely that Toshio, likewise, was going to be pulled into the same pattern.

Leaving behind Ikumi who appeared to still have something to say, he briskly went to the dirt floor entryway. Coming from the room beside the entryway, Tamae bowed her head. What she held out towards him was a used direct mail envelope, so he knew that inside was the fixed fee, from years of knowing them.

"Thank you...." Tamae said with a shrinking voice. Toshio took the envelope with a sigh.

"It's not that I don't get how hard it is on you, Tamae-san, but can I ask you not to call me over things like this? While I'm doing things like this, there are patients who really do need an examination who might come rushing into the hospital at their last minute."

"I'm sorry," Tamae said, fully cowering into herself. "Mother just insisted...."

"I understand that. But, for me, being called out for gossip is a problem. If you could at least convince your mother to come into the hospital herself, if you can't try to hold back the flood just a little..."

"...Yes, sir." Tamae absently lowered her head. Toshio gave another sigh and exited the entryway. There was a shimmer of hot air over the road, the baking asphalt letting off a heat haze. There was no escaping the frustration that came with the languid stagnation in the air.

With a mother like that, living all alone with her was a hardship he knew but when he was busy like this, and furthermore for dragging him out in this heat, he couldn't help being frustrated with Tamae. If she at least had other relatives or someone to exchange viewpoints with it'd be one thing but Ikumi had married into the village from outside and was estranged from her own family, and due to her bizarre talks and habits, her in-laws in the village cleanly and precisely cut ties with her. Her neighbors kept a respectful distance, or so they called it, so about the only ones who would interact with her were those who had too much time on their hands, the old folks at Takemura. If it was demanded they would help her and in their own way they offered assistance but, they weren't by any means welcome to become too involved. The mother and daughter were isolated, just the two of them, on the outskirts of the village.

"Good grief..."

The lingering scent of incense still making him nauseous, he had the feeling it had stained its way into his white coat. Being friends with Seishin, he was used to the smell of incense but he'd never thought of the incense at the temple as being unpleasant. Rather, he even thought that in its own way it had an air of refinement but, that might have been a matter of personal preference. Or maybe it was a matter of the incense itself.

Just as he was thinking he'd change his white coat once he got

back to the hospital, resident Takami made an appearance there beside the hospital. Still in uniform, he wiped at the nape of his neck with the towel draped around it. As he stopped the car, Takami gave a friendly smile.

"Ah, Junior Doctor!"

Toshio had the feeling he was being saved in some way, by Takami's simplistic smile.

"Working hard. Doing the rounds?"

"And you are working hard as well. A house call?"

"To the Itou's Ikumi-san, yeah."

As Toshio said that, Takami gave an exaggerated sigh. "That's, yeah, hard work all right, isn't it?"

"Tell me about it. Takami-san, you're looking boiled alive there. You wanna come in, drink something cold and cool off?"

"That's, yeah, I'd be grateful."

Takami gave a broad smile. Toshio motioned to the passenger's seat, but he waved his hand and motioned to the hospital. It was about ten meters to the hospital parking lot. Catching his meaning, he drove on into a space in the parking lot, Takami following after him.

"Well, you know, I thought I should at least try to pretend to do some basic information gathering, and all."

Toshio stepped out of the car, looking back at Takami's embarrassed face. "Information gathering? On what?"

"Of course, I accept that that thing over at Yamairi was a natural death, but. For the record, confirming that there were no suspicious people sighted wouldn't be a bad idea, I thought."

"Ah ha."

"It's just, if I don't do that much, it feels like I'm not doing my part so to speak, so if you want to say I'm just going through the motions, that might be true." Takami laughed and wiped his face. Toshio headed towards the side entrance also laughing,

"That might be human nature."

"With that in mind, going here and there asking around was well and good but, in the end, in asking, the most I got any talk out of was Katou-san's boy. Sounds like a few days ago, a scary man was seen walking up along the village road or something."

"Scary?" Toshio asked while heading up into the side entrance.

"He is a kid and all; what scared you and how, I asked, but couldn't get any essentials. In summary, he spotted a man at twilight, carrying a bat or a hammer or something like that, and all I got out of it was that it was scary. According to Kyousuke-kun, the Kanemasa house is an Oni's nest, it seems."

Toshio laughed. "That's what they mean by 'childish.' I might've been the same when I was a kid."

"You don't remember?"

"I forgot. Going off the stories people around tell me, I was a far throw from anything as cute as that, but."

Takami's voice rose in a laugh, causing Kiyomi's face to pop out from the break room. Kiyomi was of course also off today but, due to the flood of patients that the doctor had been unable to make any progress through, he had her come in. Of course it was a pain for Kiyomi when it was at last her day off but, having to pay her wages for it made it a pain for Toshio too.

Takami took off his cap and greeted Kiyomi. Toshio brought Takami back towards the waiting room, stripping off his white coat, tossing it aside and standing in front the ventilator opening for the air conditioner. That was when he at last had a stunning revelation.

"I feel that air conditioning may be the greatest invention of mankind."

"Don't you mean air conditioning and refrigerators?"

"May be."

"I walked around in the middle of this heat and when I finally had someone talk to me, all I got was the scary man story and the car story. You know, at the end of July there was the boy from Kami-Sotoba who was hit by a car, wasn't there?"

Yeah, Toshio nodded.

"Since that's the extent of it and nobody's particularly seen anyone unfamiliar, the village is peaceful."

"That's more because it's a closed universe."

Takami laughed as he fanned himself with his cap. "For the record, it was on my mind so I did try going to Kanemasa, too, though."

"And you walked all the way to a place like that. Still, what was on your mind?"

"Well, that car---it was a black, big foreign car, they said, right? There was a rumor that it might have been the Kanemasa car."

"I see. Easy to see how they'd make the association."

"Therefore, just in case, I went to Kanemasa to see what it was like. Confirming whether it was really unmanned or not wouldn't be bad, I thought."

"Hnnn?"

"The gate appears to be sealed by a bar from the inside, so whether I pushed or pulled it wouldn't open. Side entrance was the same. So, I tried to take a peek inside, you see?"

Toshio opened his mouth. "See what, that you jumped the fence?"

"Yeah, well," Takami said all the more embarrassed. "It was

bothering me you see. Inside was a pitiable sight."

"Don't tell me, it was ransacked or something?"

"No, nothing like that. The front yard allllllllways had grass planted. It did but, with nobody living there to water it, then there's this drought on top of it... So, their prized lawn was completely withered. It's, if seed's not planted fresh again, it won't become a lawn again."

"I see," Toshio laughed.

"But, if a car came in or if people were coming and going, you'd be able to tell by the dirt, wouldn't you? For example, there were no marks like footprints, so after all there probably really is no one there, yes? At the least, it doesn't seem like anybody's coming or going. I tried to peek in through the windows too but, it doesn't seem there's anyone there. Incidentally, when I went around to the back, I did see the meter, though."

"Heh?"

"The water and the gas's stopcock was closed. The power meter didn't move an inch either. It didn't seem they were using any gas either. That'd mean unmanned right? If it's all shut off like that, and without the gift of air conditioning or refrigerators, you couldn't live."

"Probably not. Even if you turn the AC off from time to time, if the refrigerator's running, the meter should move, too."

"That is correct. Wow, it sure was a waste of effort."

Takami's visibly tanned face was red as he laughed. Toshio returned a forced smile. Everyone was starved for a story. ---No, they were starved for change. In a rut for years on end, they lived without any change. The incident in Yamairi was a stone thrown into that. Maybe they wanted to preserve those ripples just as long as they could. Maybe they didn't want it to be wrapped up as a simple tragedy. It wasn't a feeling Toshio didn't understand himself.

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"How about it, shall we exorcise the day's misfortunes?" Hirosawa said, earning a nod from Mutou. Yuuki had no objections, so he followed along with the two.

It was after the Gotouda funeral service. It was the first time Yuuki had participated in a burial ceremony, seeing a coffin being buried beneath the earth. The coffins used in the village had no small window to view the face. There was no final viewing at the crematory to follow driving the nail into the coffin after the funeral. Maybe that was why even burying the coffin in the hole, the sense of burying the dead themselves seemed so distant, missing that feeling as if the dead were departed for eternity that came with the ashes being presented from the crematory. There was a strange nuance of a difference between the separation in this to that of cremation.

Hirosawa and Yuuki went towards the heart of the village--called Sotoba---to a shop located just outside of the shopping district.

Yuuki was fascinated. Having lived in the village for a year now, he too had needs that brought him to the shopping district frequently. He realized that separated out from it was this building. Furnished with white terracotta, it had a black wooden door beneath a sunken in alcove, with ground glass. It looked to be a shop of some sort but, due to the ground glass making him unable to see inside of the shop, and with the small window that faced outward being made of stained glass, in the end he never was able to peek in. The shop's name was "creole" if he recalled. It was in the crushed glass in golden roman letters but Yuuki didn't know what the word was, much less what kind of shop it was. It had caught his attention every time he'd seen the shop but, without anything he

really need of it, he thought he'd ask Mutou about it one day, then kept forgetting about it.

Hirosawa opened the door and the cool air from the air conditioner and the soft sound of piano music flowed out. There was a counter and a small table, the smell of coffee; it was a cafe, Yuuki blinked.

"Welcome."

At the counter was a man in his mid-forties. He wore a white shirt and black pants. He had the air of a bartender. Hirosawa didn't hesitate to sit at the counter. Yuuki and Mutou lined themselves there as well.

"You match. Was there some misfortune?"

Hirosawa nodded at his friendly voice. As he called for an iced coffee, Yuuki did the same.

"The Mourning Crew, yes. ---This is," Hirosawa began, motioning to Yuuki. "Yuuki-san. This is the manager, Hasegawa-san."

Nice to meet you, Hasegawa greeted with a smile. "You're Yuuki-san from the Workshop, aren't you? It's a pleasure."

"Liksewise. ....So it was a cafe then, this place."

At Yuuki's words, Hasegawa's voice rose in a laugh. "We also serve food and at night we serve alcohol as well, though."

"This man here," said Mutou with a pout. "He avoids putting a sign out on purpose."

"Is there a reason for that? I mean, I noticed the shop myself but, since I didn't know what kind of shop it was, I passed. Even though I'd been looking for a cozy little cafe."

"You'll have to excuse me. Please allow me to take this opportunity to accept your patronage," said Hasegawa, a hidden meaning to his smile. "It's quite all right, like this. If I don't put one out, the little old men and women won't make a haunt of this

humble shop. I must most humbly pass on playing the music popularly requested or being told to make Natto for lunch. Indeed, arrogant as it is, I am selective in this way about my clientele."

"So it's hard to approach," Mutou said with a glare. "A cafe that won't put out a sign, writing the name in western letters, he does it to make it hard to read on purpose, this man here."

"How is that read, anyway?"

"It's creole," said Hirosawa. "Yuuki-san, how do you feel about jazz?"

"I don't hate it. So I see, it's that creole, is it. But, in that case, isn't that Dixie?" asked Yuuki with a laugh. "Shouldn't it be Chick Corea?"

"You got me," said Hasegawa with a broad smile. "Precisely the type of customer this humble shop has been waiting for."

Yuuki chuckled.

"Hasegawa-san is also a part of the moved-in group," Hirosawa said with his own smile. "Though, his wife is originally from Sotoba, however."

"Ah--is that right?"

"You're going on three years now, is it?" Hirosawa asked, earning a nod from Hasegawa.

"Three and a half. I'm just grateful we've managed to stay in business. When we'd first moved I'd worried my wife would have to work the fields but, as it is we've had a few people bless us as regulars."

"It might not be my place to ask this but, why Sotoba?"

Hasegawa gave a cynical smile. "I used to work at a trading firm actually. Until four years ago when we lost our son."

Yuuki's was at a loss for words.

"Ah, please don't mind it. It was sudden, a motorcycle accident. We were dispirited. You could say that we lost our sense of footing in the city, perhaps. My wife had only her father left, but he died as if following after our son. So we'd moved. Best open a cafe and retire together with my wife, I thought."

"Is that so. Does your wife work in the shop?"

"She is out at the moment. The dinner hour is a touch early. Lunch and dinner, and afterwards, those are the busies hours."

"You also serve lunch?"

"But only simple things and the daily special. Dinner is a similar affair. Our fundamentals are coffee and liquor, you see."

"But what a relief. Sotoba's a great place but, there wasn't a single place to drink."

"You think so too?" Hasegawa said with a smile. "When I'd thought, 'let's move to Sotoba', that was first on my mind. 'But, in Sotoba there's no place to drink, no cafe', I'd thought. So, I'd started one myself. I'd been interested in it before. It's really half hobby to me."

Hirosawa smiled as Yuuki nodded in understanding before he looked to Hirosawa.

"And how was school to---ah, it's currently summer vacation, isn't it."

"But really, I had to come here for a little while. I need a break today."

"You've worked hard. As it's hot, it must have been difficult."

"Yes and no, you could say. It was prearranged."

"Arranged?" Yuuki asked; Hirosawa nodded.

"The graveyard. The burial plot was already emptied, wasn't it?"

"Aa...."

"As we bury, for each death there needs to be a plot the size of one coffin. But, we also plant a fir there. At the end of the mourning period, the sotoba is taken down and a fir is planted. As recent deaths come about and the plots of land are needed, the oldest firs are cut down and the soil is prepared. That's what we mean by arrangements, but if someone hasn't made arrangements it really is tiring. Especially during the summer when the burial can't be put off for the arrangements."

"A tree is cut down? By us?"

"We have had to do it before. For the most part, we rely on the Yasumori Contractors, however. In the summer if we don't ask them, it couldn't be done in time."

"Yasumori Contractors---Ah, in Monzen. They also do that sort of thing?"

"There isn't much construction in the village. Most of the jobs that they do in the village are graveyard preparations. The old missus Gotouda had just asked the contractors this past spring. The soil was still soft, so in a way it was a great help but putting your son in in your place is a pitiable story."

"In Sotoba, you make arrangements before you die?"

"There are people who do. Parents grow old and look at their remaining years, and wanting to pass without anything left undone to fluster others, oversee their own graveyard preparations. It's not unusual per-say but it isn't as if everybody does it. Old missus Gotouda was a dedicated, kindly mother."

"....Yes she was."

"It really is a pitiable story. It truly puts one at a loss for words. If someone elderly dies after battle with a long illness, it's a relief to the bereaved family in a way as well, and if they also have been able to prepare themselves, they may have given up already. But, for a parent who'd suddenly lost a child, I wonder if there are any

words in the world that could offer any relief."

Hasegawa gave a meaningful nod to Hirosawa's words. Mutou, too, had a serious expression. Hirosawa gazed into his glass.

"I have a daughter who will be turning four and, if I try to imagine the day she dies, trying to think of anything comforting feels like nonsense to me."

Yuuki's only son's face floated to mind. "....That is definitely true."

As he approached old age, with only his son left, if he had prepared for his own impending death, to have his son go before him... He was overwhelmed by the thought of a surviving parent's grief. He remembered Fuki's heartbreaking, broken visage. Alone amongst the hustle and bustle of the funeral service, shrinking into herself as if she'd lost any support, any place to be, the form of one resolutely bearing her suffering. Nobody could find the words to offer to her, he was sure. The old mother sat isolated from the people around. ---No.

Yuuki drew his brows together slightly. The people around her, rather, didn't appear to pay Fuki herself any mind at all. Nobody had concerned themselves with the old mother who had lost her son. The people there's interest was instead in Yamairi.

"....What was with that," Yuuki murmured, Hirosawa turning his head.

"It's nothing," Yuuki dismissed with a forced smile. "But it was Shuuji-kun's funeral, while the fuss was all about something else. Somehow, I'd gotten myself wrapped up in the idea that in a small community like this, in a situation like that a bereaved family would be supported by neighborly warmth."

Hirosawa and Mutou exchanged looks. Hirosawa gave a troubled smile.

"Indeed---at today's service, Shuuji-kun and Fuki-san were both ignored for talk of Yamairi."

That was like some kind of festival. He knew the village was

starved for a topic. There were those in the area who delighted at a case like this. But, at least while there seated at the funeral, they didn't need to be so excited about it; Hirosawa could certainly understand someone thinking as much.

"And furthermore, what happened was a complete disaster. Three elders from this very village met with an unnatural death, didn't they? I understand that that's a big affair, so I understand that it'd be impossible for talk of it not to come up when meeting for the funeral but, I don't think that it's something they should have been talking so excitedly about. It was a tragedy that befell the community as a whole---I don't think that's the proper way to treat such a thing."

"Yuuki-san, you remember the mushiokuri, don't you?" Hirosawa said quietly. "We marched from hokora to hokora bearing the Betto, didn't we?"

"Ah---yes." Yuuki tilted his head. Hirosawa may have been about to say something abruptly, and in a moment was at a loss for how to put his thoughts in order.

"The traveler's guardians in the hokora... are the gods on the roads, aren't they?"

"I think it may be better to call them the gods of the boundary, myself. In Sotoba there are many travelers' guardians. They may be in the form of Jizo or Koushin mounds but they're all made of stone, and their nature is clearly to serve the role of travelers' guardians. The border of inside and outside of the village, they're the gods of that boundary."

Yuuki blinked. "I'm sorry. I'm a bit lost on where you're...."

"Pardon," said Hirosawa with a smile. "The traveler's guardians are fundamentally the gods of the boundary between the inside and outside. We call our own affairs 'internal' or 'ours', don't we? That doesn't refer only to your own home as a building, it's more of a conceptional idea. You and your own space, your family and the memories tied in with them, there are various things caught up in the image of what we call 'internal' or 'ours', aren't there?"

"Ah, certainly."

"When talking about buildings, the boundary line for 'inside' is clear. It's the walls of the house, or perhaps the boundary lines of the property. It's known to be denoted by the walls or the fence surrounding a space but, at any rate, there's a boundary where you can say from here to here is my house, isn't there? Even so, the image we have for 'internal' or 'ours' has no such clear boundary. Beyond the 'inner', distinctly unable to be defined inner or outer, is a gray zone. It's the space that's sometimes internal and sometimes external."

"Haa... yes."

"The village is the same. In Sotoba we have a district determined by the administration, and that's a clearly defined boundary. But the image of the village's boundary is vague. That is to say, the village itself has an 'inner' or involvements of its own."

"Its own company, its own school..."

"Yes, just like that. We recognize the 'inner' or 'own' portion of the village but if there's an 'inner' or 'own' there in theory must be an 'outer' or 'other', thus in the end, the world is split into two, the inner and the outer, and in doing that, there's the question of whether that barrier is inner or outer."

"Haa, that's certainly...."

"That's what it means to draw a conceptional line like that. What's white is over here, what isn't white we'll push over here as black. If you do that in the end you have vaguely gray remains that you can neither call white nor black. In other words it's the grey zone that separates the image into two parts. That grey at times--depending on what you're comparing it to, it can become white or it can become black."

"Ah, that could be the case at times, couldn't it?"

"What we imagine as the boundary of 'inner, belonging to the village' isn't clearly defined as inside itself. It's surrounded in that

grey zone. This vague gray zone is a barrier, and a barrier is ultimately both inner and outer. The traveler's guardians are the gods of that boundary. Placed between the inner and outer, ours and others, the gods themselves are that boundary."

"Huh...."

"So the traveler's guardians protect the 'ours' from invading hindrances from the outside, that is to say evils, and rgwt usher in good harvests, at the same time being classified as an evil spirit themselves. This duality of those stone traveler's guardians' has, since times immemorial, made those stones into the barrier between those things which have life and those which do not. That's why stones, stone monuments and stone Jizo have been set up around the barrier of the village as traveler's guardian deities."

"Ah, the memorial services center around those traveler's guardian deities then, making them offerings. While doing that, we wave the Betto around the village, drawing out the impurities and evils, the insects and the disease, casting it into the barrier. Now that you mention it, that kind of festival certainly involved taking it outside of the village to dispose of it, but in a way it wasn't really outside."

Hirosawa smiled broadly. "That's right. That's precisely the duality of the barrier. In the village, Oni are a metaphor for disease. The Oni go along with the Betto out to the village border. While we do that, we do the Uppo dance to step into and purify the inner or our own portion of that border."

"I see, Oni are outer and other, good fortune is the inner and ours."

Yuuki smiled, making Hirosawa smile as well.

"Even now," Hirosawa said with a gentle laugh. "this village performs a festival like that with great religious zeal. To those of the village, there's a strong feeling of 'inner' or 'us'. To put it another way, they're isolated from the 'outer' or 'others'."

"Ah.... I think that's something I understand."

Hirosawa sighed, gazing into his coffee glass.

"Yamairi was a community on the verge of extinction. There were three people left, and being geographically isolated as well, I think there was a sense of separation from those of the village. If you were to ask if Yamairi was inside or outside of the village, then by its history and by the administrative distinctions, you would have to call it inside. But, somewhere beyond conscious thought, I think there's a sense that it's outside somewhere, an other."

Yuuki nodded, "Ah. It's a far cry from the image of inner or us, it's become a border itself, Yamairi."

"That's what I think. The elderly died in Yamairi, and because the people are 'ours' it's a pure and real tragedy. Three old people out on their own, with nobody to care for them, dying in their desertion. But, while it is a tragedy as something personal, internal, if we set it as outside for a moment, it becomes nothing more than an event that happened across the shore. That said, if something happens across the shore, a tragedy is still a tragedy. When we set eyes on a calamity in a foreign country, it's a tragedy, we think 'those poor people', we have cognizance that it's a tragedy for the other side. A certain sense of reality, of its relation to us is missing but we accept that it is a tragedy, we react to it, we hold an awareness of it as a tragedy."

"But, Yamiri wasn't outside and they weren't others either?"

"That's true. Yamairi was the border. Neither inner nor outer, ours nor others. It isn't inside or personal to treat it with solemnity. That said, it's not far enough outside not to hold an awareness of it, not to make a fuss about it."

"Ah... is that right. I see."

"That's probably why the way they're handling Yamairi seems so hopelessly flippant. And while a funeral is a type of religious service, any ritual makes an ordinary day into the extraordinary day. In a way it's a festival. A great number of people have gathered around to participate in one ceremony, there's no denying that that is one meaning to the word festival. And then another something

unusual comes bounding in. It isn't completely unrelated, but this abnormality is one that's at a safe distance. So then we have what's known as synergy---it would probably be impossible to keep it from exciting them."

"I suppose so...." Yuuki said with a nod. I see, that's what it is, he thought. While he accepted it, it was true that somewhere in his heart was a despondency.

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"There's no particular reason to rush. If it works for you, we could do the all night vigil tomorrow."

Though Tokujiro was speaking from the other end of the telephone, Seishin tilted his head.

"Is that really all right?"

"It's just terrible. If only Hidemasa-san's eldest son-in-law didn't go and made arrangements on his own, but he didn't understand the way things are and went and had them cremated."

Seishin blinked, still holding the receiver. "Well---indeed, Hidemasa-san was---"

"You might say there's no other way to return those remains, that might be true enough, but. The truth is, the Boss Ohkawa is at the point he wants Gigorou-san cremated, himself. With that said, it's just terrible, having Mieko-san burned too. That son-in-law didn't know that we bury here, he should have followed up with what to do with the remains himself too. Honestly, it's just insensitive."

Seishin was silent. Rather than the son-in-law who had made arrangements being insensitive, it was likely more that Sotoba itself was unique in still burying its corpses. It probably couldn't be helped that people not of the village wouldn't put much weight on the custom and would take it lightly.

But, those in the village had a strong resistance towards cremation. Indeed, the dead were as dead as a corpse as they were ashes but those of the village held the view that cremating inflicted injury on the deceased body.

"Since that's how things are, there's no use hurrying the funeral. Well, with Shuuji-kun's funeral having been just the other day, since

there is some leeway, I thought tomorrow might be better."

"That it may."

"In the mean time, I'll go with the police to pick up the bones. I'll manage plans for the funeral once I get back, so tonight just take her easy."

I will await your contact, said Seishin hanging up the phone. He thought a little, setting his eyes on the blackboard. There were several things entered onto the itinerary but, all of it were things Ikebe or Tsurumi could do. Seeing that much, Seishin stood up. He left a memo on the blackboard and exited the office.

Traveling the path he had become so used to traveling he descended the mountain to the Ozaki clinic back yard. Looking at his wristwatch, they were in non-examination hours. If there were no house calls, Toshio might have been in the waiting room or perhaps in his own room in the main house wing. Walking along the yard to peek into the waiting room, he could see him facing his desk and gazing over some paperwork from behind. He turned when Seishin lightly tapped on the sliding door's glass window. As Toshio made an intentionally sour face and motioned inside, Seishin opened the glass door and came inside. The air conditionedair was pleasant.

"You picked up the stank of a rotting corpse right away and came running, huh?"

"----Eh?"

Seishin stared at Toshio who said that to him as soon as he entered the room.

"You came because you heard the bodies are coming back, right? When it comes to things like that, monks are a class of vultures."

Seishin gave a wry smile. "Vultures or hyenas, either way. Did the results of the autopsy return?"

"SUD."

"What's that?"

"It's what they call Sudden Unexplained Death. Anyway the situation was abnormal so it looks like the police did a thorough one as well but, the end result is cause unknown. It doesn't look like the culture labs and stuff are in here, so for the real results we're probably talking about three weeks but, anyway that's the conclusion for now."

"But that's...."

Even if you 'but that's...' at me, Toshio breathed.
"More than not knowing the cause for old man Murasako and Gigorou-san, it's closer to say the the corpse wasn't in a good condition for determining the cause. To begin with in natural deaths, even with a full autopsy the clear cause of death can only be determined under or about half the time. On top of that this heat catalyzed the decay. The internal organs mollified and fused together muddily. So even if you tell us to get a clear cause of death.... Moreover it's not like we have a medical coroner like the ones in the capital or a metropolis. Around here there's no forensic pathologist to do the autopsies, just regular general practitioners. We're at our limit here." Toshio sighed. "Old man Murasako, anyway, is thought not to have had any external injuries while he was alive. The decay and post-death damages---these were mostly by insects too but---they were intense, so what the cause of death was couldn't be specified. Gigorou-san himself had advanced decay but on the parts discovered at least none of the injuries looked like anything that happened while he was alive. After he died he was preyed on and damaged by wild dogs, it seems is their story. There're parts that were never uncovered but if you think about it while looking at the way things were on the scene, you'd conclude it was sudden unexpected death."

"And Mieko-san?"

"Old lady Mieko too, didn't have any external injuries. It's sound that she died a natural death. When she was opened up she had some problems here and there it looks like. She had coronary arteriosclerosis, myocarditis, postmortem lividity in the lungs and abdominal cavity, and what was especially striking was the necrosis

of the liver tissue. Might have been acute liver failure, acute hepatitis brought on by liver inflammation, something along those lines."

"Oh..." Seishin nodded.

"For the two old guys, they were dead perhaps five or six days. ----On the contrary," Toshio sait sharply, thrusting his mug towards Seishin. "Old lady Mieko was dead about thirty hours."

"There was no mistake about it, after all?"

"No mistake about it. Ain't that the craziest story? The old man died, and the old woman goes on living with the old man's corpse for days. Without a single word to anyone. Her futon was lined up nicely with his in the room. The old woman herself crawled out of the futon and went out to the yard to die, is how it looks."

Seishin accepted that. In the village, there were rumors floating that Mieko had followed after her husband. In these circumstances, such an interpretation was hard to avoid.

"The old lady herself died a natural death. And furthermore it's certain she was tending to the old man, so there's no way he could have had an accident or fallen. If there was an accident, no matter what the circumstances, she should have called someone, called an ambulance. It looks like Hidemasa-san and Gigorou-san both died in their futons. Old lady Mieko came here before she died saying both were in bad condition. She came for Gigorou-san's medicine, though. He had chronic hypertension. It didn't seem like anything specific was bad in any specific way by any means, so she was saying it was probably a could, but."

Seishin blinked. Probably a cold---those were words he'd heard someplace else, recently.

"At any rate, that's how it's being laid to rest. Maybe it's possible they just died like that, so it goes sometimes. At least, if there was no incident, there's no case. Nevermind that the wife was in advanced age, she was under the pressure of tending to two sick patients. She probably didn't have time to eat, sleep or breathe. So

when her husband died, a tense thread was cut and down she went."

"In other words, while Mieko-san was tending to Hidemasa-san's health, she was the one under too much strain to inform anyone of Hidemasa-san's death, as she already in such poor health herself...?"

"So we've got to assume right? But, she seemed well enough to at least make a call. Her husband was dead besire her, she herself was in such poor condition that just getting to her phone would be difficult; in those kind of situations, don't people become even more desperate to get to a phone? But then, she wasn't desperate at all. The phone was at her bedside. If she even just got up from bed, her hand could have reached the telephone stand. She didn't even have to get up. She could have raised her body and stretched out her hand and made it somehow. But, the old lady for whatever reason decided instead of just reaching her hand out, to go two meters along the floor towards the outside for a few breaths of fresh air."

And furthermore, four or five days had passed since her husband had died, Seishin added on in his mind. Just what had happened to Mieko?

"Gigorou-san tended to have high blood pressure and was always getting medicine to lower that from us. So he might've had a cerebral hemorrhage brought on by high blood pressure or some cardiac disease. But, the old man from the Murasako's himself didn't have any illnesses hanging on him that could be called life threatening. If I try to think of a cause, all I get is that summer cold the old lady mentioned."

"Is a summer cold something that kills someone?"

Toshio let out a heavy sigh. "Even if it was a cold, when you die you die. Even among the viruses that cause summer colds, there's some scary ones. Influenza causes inflammation of the lungs but a summer cold causes cardiac inflammation."

"Then----"

"The possibility, at least, is there."

"Even so, three people are three people."

Even if we are all mortal, he tried to say, though Seishin swallowed those words down.

Toshio waved his hand.

"It definitely seems strange but, there's a chance it could've happened. If we're only saying something's possible, there's the possibility Martians swept down and scared them to death too."

Seishin gave a wry smile, Toshio himself giving another simmering smile.

"The three in Yamairi were getting on in age. True Hidemasa-san didn't have any especially chronic disease, but he had weak bronchial tubes; every time he caught a cold in the winder it became bronchitis. Maybe it turned to bronchitis this time too. Mieko-san at least seemed healthy but she couldn't get around like her body was brand new. And in the case of acute liver failure, there are times when liver failure leads to hepatic encephalopathy. Once hepatic encephalopathy occurs, there's a change in levels of consciousness, and that sometime leads to unusual behaviors. That could even be the reason for why she lied down for bed happily next to her husband's corpse. ----More to the point, there's no other reasoning to explain it, might be the way to put it."

"Oh....."

"But for the police what's more pressing than the three dead human bodies are the leftover animal body parts here and there. In the Murasako kitchen and in Gigorou-san's kitchen, something was chowing down. Heartily, too. 'Cause it was the kitchen?"

"So, wild dogs after all?"

Toshio drew back.

"Who knows? Putting aside wild dogs playing at having a nice sit-down dinner in the kitchen, the police suspect rabies. They didn't seem to find any signs of the rabies virus in Mieko-san for the time being but they were really persistent in asking if she'd had a the

vaccine and gamma globulin or not. At first they thought she might have slipped into a psychosis but they can only think the people at least died normally, so it seems they threw out that line of reasoning."

"Is that so...." Seishin murmured. He naturally let out a breath. Maybe he was relieved, or maybe it was because of something else, he himself didn't know.

He looked up when Toshio gave a grandiose, overdone sigh.

"---By the way, you, how long are you going to stay standing there?"

Yasuyo was taking a break in the break room when Ritsuko and Yuki brought in the tea.

"Tea ti----me!"

Yasuyo looked up from her mail order catalog at Yuki's merry voice, nodding her gratitude.

"Thank you."
"You're very welcome," Yuki said puffing out her chest childishly, then turning to look to the door behind her again. "Did the doctor say what he's doing? Maybe I should call him in. Or, would it be better to bring it to his waiting room?"
"Ah, you don't need to worry about it. When I peeked in earlier, it looked like the Junior Monk had come."
Oh my, Ritsuko raised her voice. "When did he.... I should have brought tea for the Junior Monk as well shouldn't I?"
"I brought it to him earlier."
"How weird," said Yuki sitting in a chair. "The Junior Monk, he's always coming out of nowhere like that. Even though he doesn't need to sneak in through the back like that, it'd be fine to come in openly."
Yasuyo smiled wryly. "Those two, they've been like that for a long time. It's because the Madame can't put on a good front."
"Can't put on a good front?"
"You see, no matter what other pretexts there are the Junior Monk is the son of the temple, isn't he? In this village, the temple is

important. The most important is the temple, next is Kanemasa, and number three are the Ozakis, it's been that way for a long time, now."
"Despite being the doctor, they aren't number one?"
There may be those who don't get sick, but nobody doesn't die. There are other places to go if you're sick but because every family is a member of that temple parish, that is the temple that has to be used. If a monk doesn't say a requiem for someone, they can't go on to that world. To the village it's only obvious, but the Madame can't accept it. She's the type of person who worries about things like that, you know."
"Hmm."
"Since he was little, she would absolutely not let the Junior Doctor go to play at the temple. No matter what, the temple is important, so if one of the family went to play and was given a snack or drink the like, she couldn't get by without a single word of gratitude. She can't bear to humble herself and bow to them. That's why though, since he was the son of the temple after all, she couldn't just say don't play with him."
Yuki's eyes were wide. "That's how things are?"
"More or less. ---On the other hand, if the boy himself were to come over himself, she has no choice but to be hospitable, and anytime something were to happen, she would have to lower herself and bow her head all the same. So, she really doesn't want him to come. But, because he is who he is, she can't say "don't come." That's how it came to the point where she didn't care if he came and went freely from the Junior Doctor's room. As long as he does that, even if she knows he's come she can pretend not to have noticed, and no matter what happens she can go on saying she never new."
"That sure is complicated..." Even though Yuki spoke seriously, Yasuyo smiled..
"Madames. On the temple side, with the Junior Monk being the way he is, neither the monk nor the Madame put themselves above anyone else. But our Madame's the one who decided on her own to let it get to her."
Yasuyo smiled bitterly. She was haughty, would that be an okay way to put it? Toshio's mother, Ozaki Takae was that kind of character. It seemed her own family was from some prestigious hospital, so the customs that placed the temple and village chief above the doctors was an exceeding affront to her dignity. She was

called "the Madame" of the hospital--in the village those called "the Madame" were until recently only the wives of the temple, Kanemasa and Ozaki---and she made no moves to eradicate that which distinguished her from the villagers.
The predecessor had that sort of front, so until Toshio came back and settled in as the medical director, Yasuyo and the other's hardships were unending. Overall, they were made to help with things from making the family meal arrangements to the cleaning, they were treated like able bodied servants. Even while resting at home on a day off, the phone could suddenly ring and they could be demanded to come over and help rearrange the furniture or the like.
"We were made to come in on our days off and help with tea parties and things like that," Yasuyo laughed. "It used to be that way. Really, what a hassle it was."
"What was with that? If it were me? If they tried to make me do that, I'd quit!"
"Yuki-chan can say that because you've only known the Junior Doctor's generation. In the Big Doctor's time, he just didn't seem to think anyone was fit if they weren't of the village. When the generations switched, really, the hospital's atmosphere did a complete turnaround. Just three years ago, there was nothing as obliging as this break room. At lunch, we ate at the back entrance by the water, there were no tea or furnishings, we had to buy and bring in our own tea lives."
"...I respect the doctor just a little bit more now."
Yasuyo's voice rose in a laugh as Yuki seemed strangely emphatic. She used the hospital staff as able bodied servants. But when it came to the hospital, she had no connection to it; that was Takae's style. No matter how busy it was, she would absolutely never help (not that she had any qualifications to do so), and in an emergency or if there was someone seeking a house call, she wouldn't even answer the phone. Called "The Madame of the Ozakis," and other than attendance at mandatory meetings, she would never mingle with those of the village, and other than going to tea ceremony or Noh plays, she stayed closed up in the house.
That Takae's son, Toshio, possessed a temperament that did not match well with either Takae nor the predacessor at all but as expected, Kyouko, whom he'd chosen as his wife, was a woman who would be said to be like Takae, which may have been a sign the son

would ultimately never escape the mother.
Ozaki Kyokou did not cohabitate. When he first returned to the village, she was in the house at that time, and the tendency to say she was going out for lessons or the like matched Takae's patterns but, eventually, though she had the house, she became fed up with it and opened an antique shop in the town of Mizobe, living in a rental apartment. If she felt like it she'd return but, those times were becoming further and further apart. Takae could not suppress her discontent with such a wife and when she returned, there were no end to their quarrels (and, because of that Kyouko's returns became further apart still) but Yasuyo found them to be a similar mother and daughter-in-law.
(.....Yeah, the Junior Doctor has it hard.)

sinnesspiel

5

Thinking she heard a horn, Yano Tae opened her eyes. Maybe because of her age, sleep was shallow. The slightest thing would make her open her eyes. Even hearing the breaks on the highway or trucks' air horns had woken her up before but in tonight's case, she had a feeling more clearly like being awoken by someone.

Looking at the clock on the tatami at her bedside, it was two in the morning. Again, the horn sounded. Realizing it was in front of the house--from the Drive-In parking lot, Tae rose.

Tae's bedroom was at the back of the house. Rather than facing the highway, it was set aside a yard that was facing the paddy fields. Coming out of that bedroom and dragging herself down the hall, there was a tatami room that doubled as a family altar. Entering that room, Tae shielded her eyes. There was a car in the front parking lot, its headlights shinning over the house. The high beams must have been on, and being summer the sliding storm shutter was left open, the bright light shining squarely into the room, and without much thought to it Tae was shaken up.

"....What's going on?"

Bare feet walking down the hall behind Tae, her daughter Kanami spoke. She turned around, seeing Kanami shielding her eyes with her hand, paled by the stark light overher.

"...I wonder."

At the same time that Tae answered, the horn honked again. Kanami crossed the room to the veranda. Her long, pitch black shadow fell over the room.

"What is this ruckus about?" Kanami called out from the sliding open doorway. Some person's voice or another called back but Tae couldn't pick up what was said. The truck was idling, loudly enough to drown out their voices.

"Hold on. Could you please turn off the light?" Kanami called out into the parking lot. "Chigusa"'s wide parking lot had one trailer, and what looked like a passenger car on the lot. The finer details couldn't be discerned. The light pouring in as if to scorch their eyes didn't help.

They may have heard Kanami's objection; the light turned off. The act robbed her of her sight. All she could see in the pitch darkness were the specks of the afterimage of the headlights. As she blinked off the faint dizziness she felt, the frustrating idling sound ceased. It seemed the idea to cut the engine finally occurred to them.

As her eyes adjusted to the light and it became quiet, she could see that there were three cars in the parking lot, illuminated by the street light. One was a jumbo trailer, two were passenger vehicles, one a sedan and the other a 1Box.

"Pardon, I'm very sorry!" a shameful young voice said. It seemed to come from a young man by the 1Box car.

"Just what is this ruckus about. What time do you think it is?"

"I am so very embarrassed. I don't know where I am and..."

Kanami narrowed her eyes and tilted her head. The young man came closer to Kanami. He was probably in his med-twenties or so, and didn't appear suspicious.

"I've driven around here so many times but I don't know the road and... I'm completely at a loss, so."

"Where is it that you are going?"

The young man lowered his head, utterly apologetic. "It's a community called Sotoba, but."

Kanami sighed. "This is Sotoba."

With an 'eh?' the young man surveyed his surroundings.

"There's a road in to our left. Right when you turn onto that is the community of Sotoba. There's a blinking stop light, Sotoba is written beneath that isn't it?"

The young man hastily sprung back, looking towards the highway. His voice rung out, shrinking as he returned forward. "My apologies! I had overlooked it!"

"Well it is easy to overlook, but. Well, I'm glad I could be of use."

"I really offer my deepest apologies!" The young man bowed his head low.

"You have business in Sotoba? At this hour?"

Yes, the young man smiled. "The truth is we should have arrived earlier but. I was careless, and it became a terrible affair. Really, how rude of me."

"By chance are you moving in? Are you the Kanemasa people, I wonder."

"Kanemasa?"

"Ah, it's the name of a place. In the northwest of the community of Sotoba is that mansion on the high grounds? The old western style house."

That is right, said the young man bowing again. "We are Kirishiki. I am so very sorry for being a nuisance to you with our change of residence."

Well, though Kanami. Then, Kanemasa really was going to have someone move in. ---That said, what a move-in it was.

"If you're going to that house, that's the road that you want. Take the road allong the river straight up, and at the intersection between the bridge that leads to the Shrine, go the opposite

direction of the shrine. That's the left."

"Take the left before the shrine."

"Right. Go straight that way, and you'll come to the mountain. It's right at the top of that slope.

"Thank you very much."

The young man bowed his head, gave another apology for waking them ad dashed back to the truck. He relayed something to the driver and once again lowered his head to Kanami before hurrying to the 1Box. Once again the engine reverberated. The truck and two cars turned about in the parking lot, heading out towards the highway. The last to leave was a white foreign car. In the driver's seat was a man and in the back seat could be seen two figures. One was a woman, and the other appeared to be a child. As the car passed in front of Kanami, she had the impression the woman nodded in salutation to her but it may have just seen something she had thought she'd seen due to the light.

"....Well, that's a surprise." Tae poked her face out from behind Kanami, seeing the truck off.

"Tell me about it. What a move-in."

"What terrible sense of direction they must have, though."

So it seems, said Kanami with a forced smile. While the entrance to the village was easy to overlook, there was only one branch off of the highway that lead into the community. if one looked properly at a map, normally someone could figure it out. In the first place, they were going to move into a village, but they hadn't even tried to visit it once before?

Kanami felt something lurking in her chest. It wasn't as if she found it particularly suspicious but. Even so, weren't the group that came by just now acting strange, somehow? It was like they went out of their way to wake up Kanami and her mother. She had the feeling that was why they asked the way.

(....Oh, that couldn't be.)

Kanami watched the car turn down the village road. The white sedan looked like quite the luxury car. The young man seemed out of character for that mansion. He didn't have the air of its master. Rather, wasn't the master more likely to be the one driving the sedan? In that case, she wondered why the master himself didn't get out of the car and come out.

"Just like I thought."

Kanami mumbled, as Tae tilted her head.

"About what?"

"It looks like they're pretty weird people."

They are, said Tae, looking still towards the village road.

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I lost the sheet I was writing down notes for the culture notes chapter break on, so if anything seems to have been forgotten let me know.

Links to Chapter 4
Chapter 4 - 1
Chapter 4 - 2
Chapter 4 - 3
Chapter 4 - 4
Chapter 4 - 5

Chapter 4 Translation Notes
Chapter 4 - 1

Natsuno starts out talking quite formally towards Ritsuko (desu, masu, keigo), slipping more towards his usual speech as they become more comfortable and casual (da/no copulas). This is normal, proper Japanese behavior by a child to an adult and amongst strangers as well. The content of his speech may be so, but I tried to relay that he was not being rude in terms of how he was speaking. I'm afraid I may have failed to carry this in translation well.

Medical:

The bump described as having been on Natsuno's knee that one grows out of, usually as they reach their full height, is Osgood-Schlatter syndrome. It's inflammation of the tendon below the kneecap, usually before the knee is finished growing. Normally it goes away as adolescent growth finishes.

Chapter 4 - 2
Geckos

- Geckos, called

yamori

or 'house guardians' are almost unanimously considered good luck in Japan. There are a few scattered legends of them representing the souls of dead warriors and being prayed away by monks, but these stories are fairly obscure to the average Japanese person. In other eastern cultures, they can be considered different forms of good or bad luck for a variety of reasons. They are quite common in summer, all the more in run down houses near forests. Draw your own conclusions to what they mean here, if they mean anything, or whether Ikumi is simply itching to be relevant. I'll continue fishing for sources on whether there's any significance to their appearance during prayer.

Chapter 4 - 3
Uchi and Soto, Inner and Outer, Us and Them

- Hirosawa engages Yuuki in a discussion of uchi and soto. Popular terms in Nihonjinron, or the study of Japanese people and their culture, they are often even left untranslated in English language discussions.

Here

is an excellent and brief summarizing article that requires no knowledge of Japanese to follow, and relates to the behaviors and feelings discussed in the chapter. The

Wikipedia article

on the subject focuses more on the linguistic aspect than the actions taken as a result. There are full essays and even full books available on the various aspects of uchi and soto.

Your translator posits that the concept is not so uniquely Japanese as to lose anything in translation when put into English terms or require a note on the words themselves to follow the text, but feedback is welcomed and it can be put back as uchi/soto if readers believe it's an improvement. In a comment below, I will post the translation of the blurbs with uchi and soto left as they are in the original text.

However universal a concept is, it bares mention how concrete it is

in Japanese, to the point of being necessarily understood in order to be competent (not even fluent) in the language.

Uchi

is a word that can literally mean 'myself' or 'us' as well as 'inside';

soto

or outside is never used as any second or third person pronoun.

Japanese verbs have an optional, psychologically directional inflection. An example is the verb suffix -kureru which form implies a benefit coming to the speaker from the verb to which it is affixed.

If Ono Fuyumi were to write your sister a letter, your sister is 'uchi' enough that it would or at least could be spoken of with the directional -kureru as if you were a direct beneficiary.

*Imouto ni tegami wo kaite**kureta**.*

She wrote a letter to my sister. You may even feel at one with fandom enough to say as much if talking about another fan you've never even met receiving a letter. This would not be the case if discussing that Ono Fuyumi wrote a letter with no connection to you, such as her accountant.

Dareka ni tegami wo kaita.

She wrote a letter to somebody.

Note that while you probably are more endeared towards Ono Fuyumi than some unknown fan and would wish more well upon her than you would a stranger fellow fan, the fan is more in your sphere of reference. Ono being soto or 'other' isn't a matter of amicability alone, nor are the Yamairi three necessarily disliked as a layer of soto.

This is not only in spoken Japanese but commonly in narratives, displaying where sympathies are expected to lie. While "

Kyousuke-kun ni kiiteinai

" (They didn't listen to Kyousuke-kun) is grammatically correct, it may mark the writer as foreign for how much more natural "

*Kyousuke-kun ni kiiite**kure**nai*

" is, presuming a greater sense of 'ours' or 'uchi' for the reader in Kyousuke.

There are other directional verbs which are based on the stations of the giver, receiver, speaker and related formalities, but we'll stick to the basics here in order to emphasize the uchi/soto concept. You'd probably use more formal inflections for the actions taken by Ono Fuyumi, or anyone you'd address as -sensei.

Chapter 4 - 4

Medical:

postmortem lividity

(in the lungs and abdominal cavity) - Upon death, the blood pools and bruising occurs at the bottom of the body, such as the back if you die face up, or the feet if you died hanging.

The blood settled in the chest and stomach, meaning she likely died face down, rather than having been, say, poisoned, dying in

her sleep, then being moved. Because there are no external wounds suggesting no assault, it further supports the idea of a natural death.

myocarditis

- inflammation of the heart muscle, which can be from a variety of causes.

coronary arteriosclerosis

- when the coronary arteries harden due to a deposit of fatty materials.

necrosis of the liver tissue

- when liver cells start to die. Ozaki lists several liver problems that could be potentially responsible.Severe liver problems can also lead to pooling fluids in the stomach.

hepatic encephalopathy

- when the liver fails to filter out certain toxins, they effect your brain, leading to altered mental statuses, ranging from comas to forgetfulness to (rarely but potentially) full on crazy.

When the body loses a large amount of blood, there are hormones released to perform emergency response activities, such as assuring the remaining blood goes to the vital organs. The hormones also stimulate the liver to break down glycogen to release glucose and fatty things into to the bloodstream. In cases of prolonged low blood supply, the liver would suffer distinct failure and begin to die off (become necrotic). I find this relevant to note given Mieko was found with heart problems when her primary physician Ozaki) pointed out a distinct lack of prior history of such in her to this point.

gamma globulin

- a vaccine for rabies.

The medical notes are perhaps more conjecture on the authoress's medical writing than something that it's my job to present as a translator, so I may remove them and just store them on side-posts so that the culture/translation notes can be provided with the full translation PDF at a later date.